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PC PowerPlay

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STRATEGY

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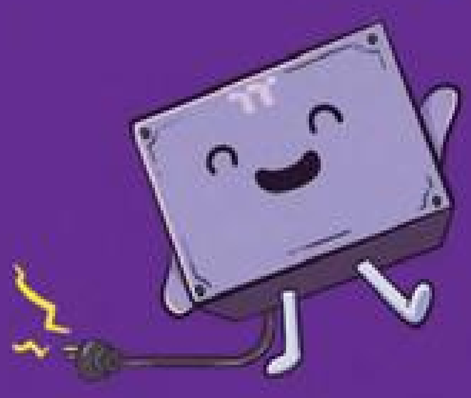

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"LEAGUE OF LEGENDS IS ONE OF PC GAMING'S MOST PLAYED GAMES"

Went out drinking with Gragas. Was found by Vi the next day in a ditch singing, "See the little goblin, see his little feet. And his little nosey-wose, isn't the goblin sweet?"

League of Legends, now celebrating its 15th year, remains to this day one of PC gaming's most played games. This is a MOBA that had more than 150 million players enjoying it last year at its peak, and which boasts over 160 champions to play as. As you might expect, *LoL* also has one of the most vibrant communities in PC gaming.

Despite this immense success, though, *LoL*'s maker Riot Games is just getting started, and with its latest content update is shaking things up like never before. Turn to page 34 for the exclusive inside scoop. Enjoy the issue.

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BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team

LAUREN MORTON

This month
Became queen of the cosy games genre. There was a totally chill parade and laid-back acoustic guitar.

SEAN MARTIN

This month
Wrestled *Fortnite*'s Peely for bragging rights over who was most dench. It ended in a split decision.

JACOB RIDLEY

This month
Tested so many GPUs that he started seeing the world as 3DMark benchmark scores.

JOSHUA WOLENS

This month
Infiltrated the Big Shell offshore facility with Hideo Kojima. Raiden's skin-tight suit itched.

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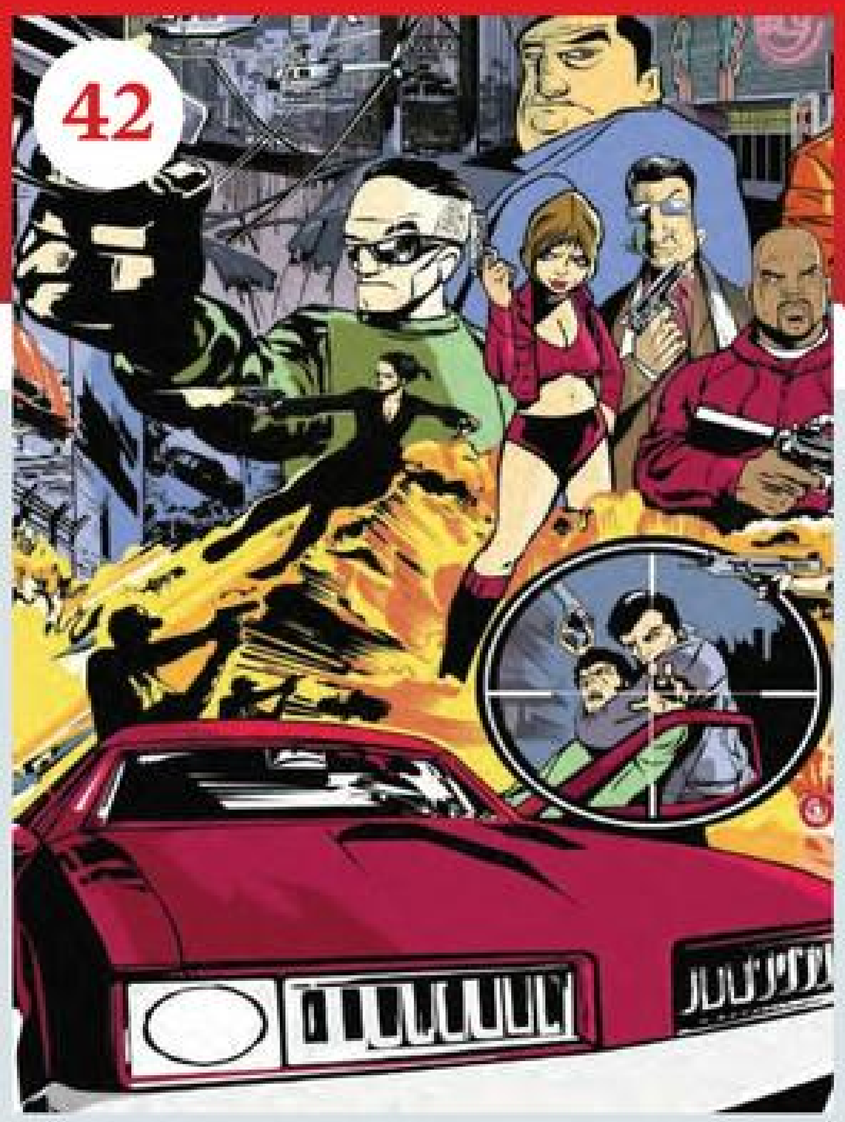

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From one side of the galaxy to the next with the one and only Jett Johnson

MONITOR

NEW[illegible]OPMENT

BAD ROLL

RPG devs blame the temporary death of **CRPGs** on 'vibes-based forecasting' from retailers

Veteran developers from RPG specialists like Obsidian and BioWare had an interesting Twitter exchange recently, and collectively reckon that the temporary death of the CRPG in the early 2000s was down to retailer meddling. A conversation between Nathaniel Chapman (a designer at Timberline with former credits at Blizzard and Obsidian) and Josh Sawyer (studio design director at Obsidian) discussed the role that retail giants formerly played in the life and death of game genres: and not with approval.

"I completely forgot how big a deal it was for Best Buy/Walmart/etc buyers to see your game, which determined your shelf space and thus your sales," said Chapman, in response to which Sawyer noted Walmart had been "prudish" about content in the past (while hypocritically clearing the shelves for *GTA*).

ACCORDING TO SAWYER, IT WAS A SNAKE-EATING-ITS-OWN-TAIL SITUATION

Sawyer then offered some specifics. "BioWare made *Baldur's Gate*, which sold well, and *BG II* sold very well. Black Isle made *Icewind Dale*, which also sold well, but after BioWare announced *Neverwinter Nights*, retailers decided that 2D iso[metric] games were dead. *Temple of Elemental Evil* was the last for a long time."

According to Sawyer, it was a snake-eating-its-own-tail situation, "I can't stress enough how often I'd hear a retail rep declare a genre/style/look was dead with zero supporting data. Truly vibes-based forecasting, which resulted in self-fulfilling prophecies."

AFEELA NERVOUS!

EV IS A (DUAL) SHOCK

Sony Honda Mobility president and COO Izumi Kawanishi livened up CES by driving a car onstage with a Sony DualSense controller. The new Afeela concept has all the features you'd expect, but the ads on the front bumper and the smoke-and-mirrors of gamepad control were a bit of a moment. ■ *AA*

POTTER CASH

MAGIC NUMBERS

It didn't trouble many GOTY lists, and the launch saw its share of controversy, but Warner Bros Games announced that *Hogwarts Legacy* sold over 22 million copies. WB exec David Haddad claims it was "the best-selling game of the year in the entire industry". ■ *RS*

FULL OF HOLES

DON'T FEAR THE REAPERS

Worried about the AI apocalypse? Don't be. Dell founder Michael Dell reckons we've nothing to fear from AI gaining sentience because humanity's good at fixing problems like "the ozone and all" before they happen. Climate change wants a word, Michael, but I guess that's a weight off my mind. ■ *JW*

It's easy to dunk on Pagiarulo's assertions about story, but worth bearing in mind that Bethesda's games do tend to have straightforward main quests, with all the really good stuff squirrelled-away in sidequests.

BAD TARGET?

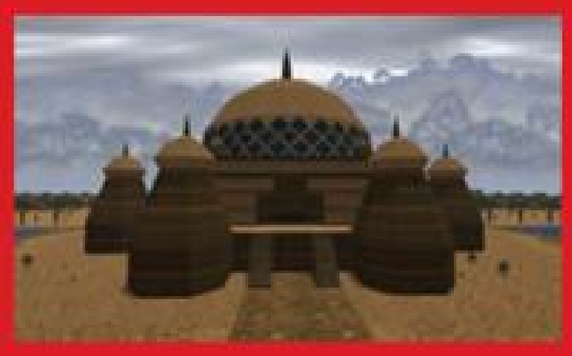
The idea that isometric RPGs aren't popular is hogwash, considering how obscenely well *Baldur's Gate III* has been doing for Larian Studios. But David Gaider, of Summerfall Games, says the issue can't be put entirely on one group. "It wasn't just retailers," Gaider wrote. "There's an 'industry wisdom' which creeps into dev teams where some things are simply declared dead or too old-fashioned, and there's no opposing this certainty up until someone else comes along and proves it's 100% untrue."

Gaider reminds me of an infamous talk by Emil Pagliarulo (lead writer and designer on *Starfield*) who spoke at a STORY conference about *Fallout 4* and *Skyrim*. This is an old talk, but Pagliarulo makes the assumption that gamers will "tear out the pages" of a game's story and "make paper airplanes" with it, arguing developers ought to "keep it simple, stupid" – limiting a narrative to one or two core central themes.

Big-box retailers are no longer the make-or-break genre setters they once were, thanks to the advent of online stores, but the frustration from developers (and players) lingers on. Because whether it's vibes-based forecasting or vibes-based dev wisdom, games that play it 100% safe are rarely memorable. ■

Harvey Randall

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Mod life
Check out *Daggerfall Unity*, a rebuild of Bethesda's 1996 RPG.

Pre-Portal
Portal: Revolution is a free fan-made and Valve-approved seven-hour prequel to the *Portal* games.

Heroes of the mod
Blizzard's *Heroes of the Storm* has now become a fully featured *StarCraft 2* mod.

Minecraft Leg-Ends
Moang and Blackbird are wrapping up development on *Minecraft Legends*.

Starry eyed
Star Citizen's Legatus bundle offered everything in the game for... $48,000 to you, good citizen.

Post-Portal
N64 whiz James Lambert got two thirds of the way through the demake *Portal 64* before the cease-and-desist landed.

LOWS

Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

THE UGLY EPIDEMIC

Stuffed full of brands and tie-in skins, shooters are getting harder to look at

There's an epidemic of ugliness in multiplayer shooters, and its cause goes by many names. Skin. Bundle. Drop. Outfit. Coating. Or the most generic: cosmetic. Unassuming at first and quiet by nature, Cosmetic Uglification is a viral affliction infecting the best shooters of our time. When left unchecked, all semblance of aesthetic cohesion is sacrificed at the altar of individual expression, exclusivity and FOMO. Every shooter I love is becoming visual ooze before my very eyes.

Signs of cosmetic uglification are everywhere: in spec ops soldiers trading tactical vests for diamond-laced streetwear, elite operators wearing Lara Croft cosplay, commandos going loud in pyjamas. As seasons rage on, live service games garner years of stylistic baggage unique to our post-*Fortnite* world. It's become normal to watch shooters that once flaunted a style of their own be infiltrated by garish outfits and pop culture guest stars. Throw in enough Mortys and Santa outfits and even the strongest art direction becomes mush. The very items that can drive us to play longer can also erode their appeal.

I recently had a moment of clarity in *Call of Duty* while being brutally executed by *Diablo IV*'s Lilith holding an AK-47: cosmetic uglification never happens all at once, but the cycle always begins at launch, and it can take over before you realise it's there.

THE PATTERN

There's no better time to enjoy a shooter's style than when it first comes out and a full party of operators actually look like characters in the same world. We really don't give default outfits enough credit. Yes, they're basic, but they're often among the most detailed, iconic and well-crafted forms our heroes can take. That's no surprise since it's how the characters were originally conceived – outfits that prevailed through months or years of concepting and discussion. They're way more special than their 'common' rarity tag implies, but it's hard to resist switching things up when a battle pass comes along or new store items drop that promise you can look different to everyone else.

In the early days of a shooter, player fashion is in line with the game's style even if you splash some cash. Immediately available cosmetics are often charms, gun skins, or simple colour variations on default outfits. But give developers enough time, and the silly skins start to arrive. It's becoming normal for me to return to a shooter after a year and smack face-first into sensory whiplash as a once visually coherent game has become a clown show.

The trend is most noticeable in *Call of Duty*, where operator bundles sporting glowing jackets, pumpkin heads

Blemish

The proliferation of cosmetics can have a real impact on gameplay, too. On several occasions, *Call of Duty* developers have had to modify cosmetics after releasing them because they blended in too well with the environment. One all-black outfit was such great camouflage that it was a legitimate pay-to-win accessory. In response, *Modern Warfare 3* is experimenting with enemy outlines.

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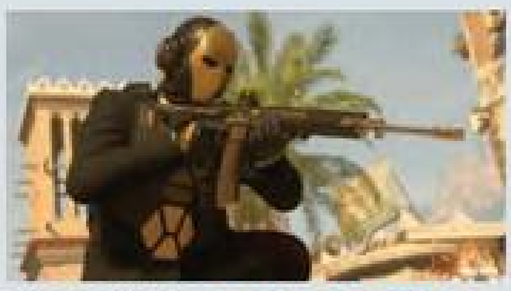
*Source: 2003~2022 OMDIA data:
NAND suppliers' revenue market share.

FAR LEFT: Tackiness aside, I can't deny that this is an impressive rendering of Nicki Minaj.

LEFT: There's a part of me that loves the absurdity of literal Satan with a machine gun.

FAST FASHION *The worst kinds of cosmetics we all have to deal with nowadays*



THE TRYHARD CALL OF DUTY
Every shooter has a fancy mask guy who's trying way too hard to look cool. Just take it off, eejit.

THE SOMEHOW $40 VALORANT
Looks cool. You want it, but immediately lose your appetite once realising it costs more than a dinner for two.

THE META HUNT: SHOWDOWN
The callsign of a sweatlord. Fashion doesn't matter here, as long as it grants a slim profile or camouflage.

THE BUNDLE HALO INFINITE
You want a cool gun skin, but you're not getting it unless you buy ten other things you don't like.

and exploding kill effects live alongside $20 packs that let you become actual celebrities like 21 Savage and Nicki Minaj. In December 2022, the final prize on the *Modern Warfare 2* season 1 battle pass was a guy with a helmet. In season 6, battle pass skins include a Groot-like tree monster that's so hard to see that Activision removed it from the game, and comic book character Spawn. The same thing happened throughout 2020 in *Warzone* as the original tacticool operators were outshined by the arrival of Rambo, John McClane and Godzilla.

When I returned to *MW2*, I couldn't find anyone using the base operators I enjoyed at launch. It was a sea of Groots, flaming skull heads, weirdo clowns and a robot woman exclusive to the Blackcell battle pass. Everybody looked cool, but nobody looked like they belonged.

THERE'S SIMPLY TOO MUCH CRAP IN EVERYONE'S DIGITAL CLOSET

TACKY ROYALE

Sometimes cosmetic uglification is a slow process. Service games that released in a pre-*Fortnite* world are taking a longer road. I played *Rainbow Six Siege* almost daily for years and failed to notice the signs.

Longtime players will pinpoint different moments when things started to change, but for me, it was Mozzie's Pizza Party skin in 2020. It retextured the defender's tan camo with a smattering of pepperonis and swapped his dirt bike helmet with a comically large, googly-eyed pizza monstrosity. It radiated *Fortnite*, and was among the first patently absurd cosmetics that'd gradually become the norm in *Siege*. At the time I thought it was a bit of harmless fun. If only 2020 Morgan knew what *Siege* would become in 2023: squads of elite operators wearing creepy muppet heads, full-body Pickle Rick Sanchez suits and Master Chief armour.

With Activision's decision to carry over microtransactions to *Modern Warfare 3* and Ubisoft's full embracing of crossover skins, *Call of Duty* and *Siege* have crossed a point of no return in cosmetic uglification: the *Fortnite* event horizon.

Post-FEH, there's simply too much crap in everyone's digital closet for the game to ever be beautiful again. Not every player buys every kitschy skin, but given enough time, enough players will earn or buy skins at some point that aesthetic repugnancy is unavoidable. I'm part of the problem: half of my *Siege* roster is equipped with battle pass filler I never intended to get, yet inexplicably decided to put on in a moment of "why not".

It's probably too late for *Call of Duty* and *Siege*, but I have hope for the shooters that have managed to dip their toes into unfamiliar territory while respecting their original style. *Overwatch 2*'s partnered skins with One Punch Man and K-pop group Le Sserfim look fantastic up close without clashing in a crowd.

The common denominator, and possibly a key factor in beating cosmetic uglification, is that Blizzard and Respawn's artists design original outfits true to the crossover brand and the game's core art style. It's possible for cosmetics to be fun and complimentary without losing sight of the game we loved at launch, but there's only one vaccine for this disease: hard work, with a bit of restraint. ■

Morgan Park

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DEMONSTRATION MAN

TOBIAS GRAFF, CEO and co-founder of Mooneye Studios, on making a game demo

While studying computer science with an emphasis on game development, Tobias Graff worked part-time for some of Germany's biggest mobile gaming companies. Soon after that, he founded Mooneye with some friends from university, entering the industry full time; and later, the company branched out into publishing games from other developers.

In 2016, Mooneye launched a Kickstarter for its first game, *Lost Ember*. It was successful, and so other people came to Graff and the team for advice on building a successful campaign. They were happy to help, but there was only so much they could do. "We were basically working nonstop on the game; we couldn't really afford to take time off to help other developers," says Graff. After *Lost Ember*'s release, which was also a success, Mooneye immediately started putting money into "a publishing pot" until it reached an amount that allowed it to look into game publishing.

Long before that however, it had its own debut game to complete and promote. This involved building a demo. The demo was however only released to streamers and YouTubers. "We wanted to minimise the bug reports and support requests and all that, because that's not really what we were looking for back then," Graff explains. "We [only] decided to have a demo at all because we were four students with no gaming credit, and we had to convince people, 'These people can actually make games!'"

Building a demo presented significant challenges. For one thing, many aspects of a game are subject to change early in development. For another, many games can't simply take the first 20 minutes or so and put it out into the world as a demo, because – as with *Lost Ember* – the start of the game is an intentionally slow build up to something. For this reason, the *Lost Ember* demo was an amalgamation of sections from the start and middle of the game; a bespoke experience. "Doing that meant working for a couple of months on things we already knew we would throw away and wouldn't really need for the final game, because we had to change everything again to stretch it out".

SAMPLE MINDS

Lost Ember is a slow and thoughtful game telling an emotional story, something that's very difficult to convey in a brief demo. Mooneye's new game currently in development follows a similar path, and so a demo is hoped for but not guaranteed.

The plan was to release *Lost Ember* in 2018, but for various reasons this was delayed to 2019. With approximately three years between the demo and the final game, some things inevitably changed. Graff gives a few examples.

"The colour of the main character, the wolf, changed. One of the main reasons was giving a better contrast with the environment; the initial one blended into a lot of things. In the demo, the main featured animal was a parrot, and a huge open area you could play around in; but for the final game, we wanted to save the parrot as a highlight for later."

Haven Park from 2021 was Mooneye's first experience publishing a game and the debut of Fabien Weibel as a developer. They worked together on the demo. Again, it was a bespoke experience, but this time one that was released to the public... for just a few weeks at a time, on a few different occasions. But why?

"We wanted to have these kind of focus groups," Graff explains. "We only published a new demo when we changed a big feature, or had something new in the game that we wanted feedback on".

A demo can be an effective piece of interactive or passive PR, a beta test, a self-contained experience all its own, or all three. One thing it can never be, it seems, is simple to make. ■

Luke Kemp

TRY ME, I DARE YOU

Demos past and present well worth your time

PT
Difficult to play today, the PS4-exclusive demo remains unique and terrifying.

THE STANLEY PARABLE DEMONSTRATION
As hilarious and unpredictable as the main game.

DELTARUNE
Stretches the definition of 'demo', but currently free, with future instalments to be paid releases.

THE PLANET CRAFTER: PROLOGUE
This is in effect an early yet very lengthy version of the full game.

LOST EMBER IS A SLOW AND THOUGHTFUL GAME TELLING AN EMOTIONAL STORY

FAR LEFT: *Haven Park* lets you chat with adorable widdle campers and fulfil their requests.

LEFT: Upcoming indie *Farewell North* will be published by Mooneye... and has a demo available now.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

PACIFIC DRIVE

RELEASE Q1, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ironwood Studios

Drive to survive in this run-based driving adventure. Scavenge resources from the anomaly-filled Olympic Exclusion Zone, upgrade your car and complete missions.

NIGHTINGALE

RELEASE February 22, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Inflexion Games

Explore, craft, fight and survive in dangerous Fae Realms either on your own or with friends. You play as a Realmwalker in this visually punchy fantasy world.

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE March, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

The new game in the classic sci-fi series promises to deliver a stunning space-based RTS that makes the most of three-dimensional movement. Incoming in March.

3 months

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

What's looking like the biggest Star Wars game of 2024, *Outlaws* sees you play as rogue scoundrel Kay Vess in an open-world adventure set in the Outer Rim.

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* slipped into 2024, meaning a longer wait to return to the Zone. We were impressed with it at Gamescom, though, so keep the faith.

FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

We were intrigued by the sequel to the hit society survival game, *Frostpunk*, when we saw it last year. Grim, difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player.

6 months

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

Bloodlines 2 now rises courtesy of *Everybody's Gone to the Rature* dev The Chinese Room. Set in Seattle, you fight as an elder vampire in a huge underworld war.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

After a huge delay out of 2023 into the back-end of 2024, our hopes remain high that Titus' return against relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one.

MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Piranha Games Inc

Fight for freedom in 100 tons of death-dealing fury. Pilot a huge stompy mech, customise it as you see fit, and enjoy new narrative-rich missions.

12 months+

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory

The long-awaited sequel to the award-winning *Hellblade*, *Senua's Saga* sees Senua return in a brutal journey of survival through the myth and torment of Viking Iceland.

ARK 2

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Studio Wildcard

The *Ark* series returns with Vin Diesel-voiced hero Santiago attempting to protect his daughter, Meeka, while surviving in a world dominated by dinosaurs.

BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

STARFIELD

WARPING IN

Good news for those still playing *Starfield*, or indeed for those who have already comprehensively explored everything the Settled Systems has to offer, as Bethesda has confirmed that "all-new gameplay options" and "new survival mechanics" are incoming in 2024. Beginning in February, *Starfield* will receive updates "roughly every six weeks" with those updates including new features we've been teased with like "all new ways of travelling" official mod support, city maps and more.

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out Now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Novarama

PUBLISHER
Novarama

LINK
united1944.com

UNITED 1944

WWII squad shooter risks being another unknown soldier

U*nited 1944* was bleeding out before my eyes. The first day I played this WWII-themed squad shooter, there were barely enough players to fill a single server. Each day, the number has dwindled. The life draining out of a young, promising game, barely days into Early Access.

As it stands, *United 1944* is two surprisingly different games sharing a set of mechanics. One, a 16v16 team shooter that draws equal inspiration from *Day Of Defeat*, *Battlefield*, *Fortnite* and survival sandboxes. The other, a low-stakes take on the extraction shooter formula that doesn't feel nearly as well thought out as its big-team counterpart. Between them, a game with a lot of potential, at least when there's enough players to fill a match.

In the primary team-play mode, Domination, Axis and Allied teams fight to oust each other from a ruined battlefield. Both teams start with almost nothing, just a crafting hammer and a knife each, and a single shared spawn point. Each player gets to pick a couple of crafting recipes to start with, including their choice of a makeshift pistol, rifle or shotgun. They're rubbish, but better than your knife.

SCRAPHEAD CHALLENGE

With shooting discouraged, both teams scramble for position. The ruins are jam-packed with respawning resources (used to craft equipment and build structures) and intel (used to create new bases at fixed control points), so the early game is a dash for wood and intel documents, plus gunpowder and metal for weaponry. *Escape From Tarkov* this ain't – this is fast and aggressive resource gathering, hoovering up piles of highlighted, glowing assets to fuel your team's expansion. Each part of the map has different resource nodes, giving some weight to where you expand towards, but it's never too hard to find what's needed.

It's a handsome-looking game too. Not technically amazing, but the maps are detailed, the accelerated day/night cycle gives them interestingly varied lighting, and the weapons and reload animations aren't shabby either. Character models are a bit bland, however, with limited cosmetic customisation options, but more unlocked through extensive play, but very few players had anything but the starting items, in the matches I was able to play.

As the match plays out, the teams level up, giving each player the option to define their class and role from a tech tree of perks and crafting options, creating interesting strategic choices. Building skills and more inventory space will help you upgrade your bases with metal walls, which shrug off most bullet-based weaponry. Or you can focus on demolitions, crafting Molotovs and grenades to break wooden and metal fortifications specifically. With good voice comms, there's real room for team and squad-wide strategies to form, and while I've yet to see this working fully in action, I witnessed glimpses of it in the few decently-populated matches I was able to find.

PLAYED IT

WITH SHOOTING DISCOURAGED, BOTH TEAMS SCRAMBLE FOR POSITION

FUN GUN RUN

But the strategy is just the connective tissue, and this is a team shooter. *United 1944*'s gunplay is light and not at all realistic, but the familiar WWII weapons look and sound satisfying. Thompson SMGs rattle messily, and the Garand rifle makes that oh-so-satisfying ping when you're out of bullets. Weapons have wide accuracy cones unless you aim down the sights, and it takes a few solid hits with most guns to knock someone down, plus some extra bullets to finish them. *Fortnite* is probably the best point of reference here, minus any kind of shield mechanic. Respawning is quick, putting players back

United 1944

at their base with their weapon and ammo intact, but any carried resources are left with their body, spoils for the victor.

This leads to knockabout, high-attrition fights once the teams start pushing at each other's bases. The defending side have the advantage, being able to respawn at the central desk of their base, while the attackers aim to destroy that structure and capture the control point, denying their opponents ground and pushing closer to knocking out their core control point on the far side of the map. Matches continue until one team loses all their territory or is determined by score at the end of 45 minutes, whichever comes first.

Despite there being no specific commander role, the base-building and resource gathering gives *United 1944* the feel of an *Company of Heroes*-like RTS played in first-person, with players scattering out in search of specific resources while the team-level thinking is focused on whether to expand, push against enemy defences or fortify what you've already got. There's definitely a good foundation here, but more than anything it needs players. I've yet to see a full 32-player match, and with numbers shrinking each day, I don't think I will.

ESCAPE FROM TEDIUM

The other half of the game, and the far weaker component, is Survivor mode. A take on the popular extraction shooter format, but with some fundamental design flaws that sucked the life out of the experience for me. This mode thrusts up to 24 players (in non-matchmade teams of up to three) into one of the regular Domination maps with the goal of working your way through the entire tech tree, crafting an extraction beacon (available only at level ten) and leaving the battlefield with whatever blueprints you managed to keep on your person when you extracted.

The reward for successful extraction is being able to use just one of those blueprints in your next Survivor match to give yourself a slight tech boost. The penalty for failure is, bizarrely, nothing. While extraction shooters tend to be games of high stakes cat-and-mouse antics, picking off other players and scavenging their gear, death in this mode has the same penalty as Domination. While you may drop any resources you've collected, you keep your gun and ammo. Base building is also enabled here, allowing you to create a stronghold and spawn point, allowing for easier hoarding.

With no match time limit, the end result is a bizarrely purgatorial experience. With no time limit, everyone on the map is just trying to leave, and to do so without quitting out and forfeiting any rewards. The fastest way to progress is either to kill other players a whole bunch, or harvest intel from locked safes around the map. To hit level ten can sometimes take over an hour of experience grinding if you're running solo, often killing the same players over and over in a cycle of retaliation.

It's a pity because the central combat of the game feels nice, but Survivor mode feels like an attempt to reshape the basic Domination format into something resembling the hot new multiplayer trend to chase, and that hasn't worked out here. There's no NPCs to fight, and with the only persistent loot being single-use perks for the next match, no long-term reason to play beyond unlocking cosmetics.

When there's enough players to properly function, Survivor mode works as a quick deathmatch alternative to Domination, albeit with a chance of spawning into a server where everyone already has MG42s researched and you've only got a rusty bolt-action that holds two bullets. In short, it's a mode in need of a serious rework. Or dropping entirely in favour of concentrating players into Domination.

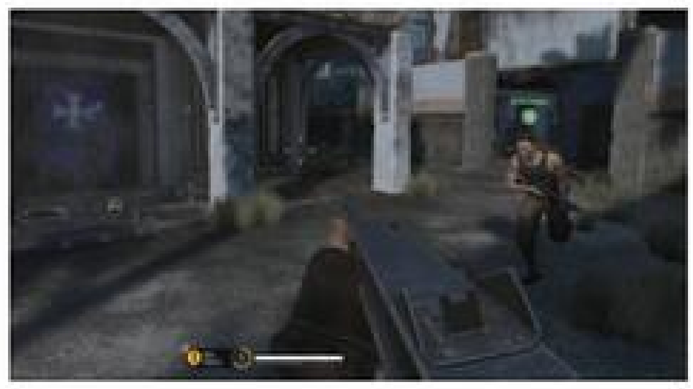
SERVER DESOLATION

And yet all of this praise and criticism feels hollow, even to me, because I've only been able to find a single match of the game's primary mode in the past two days, and it was far from a full server. At most hours there's too few players to even begin a round, let alone putz around with just five players per team. The extraction shooter mode is similarly desolate, although with just a couple players online, you can at least experience the game's gunplay, albeit in an awkward, increasingly spiteful cycle of respawns and griefing. Neither is enough to make a game, though, and with no bots or NPCs, it's impossible to recommend it unless things change.

I'm hoping that Novorama can turn things around and bring in more players. But if not, then let this be the game's memorial: it was sometimes pretty neat.

Dominic Tarason

SURVIVOR MODE WORKS AS A QUICK DEATHMATCH ALTERNATIVE TO DOMINATION



Sniping is risky business. Even SMG counter-fire is surprisingly accurate.

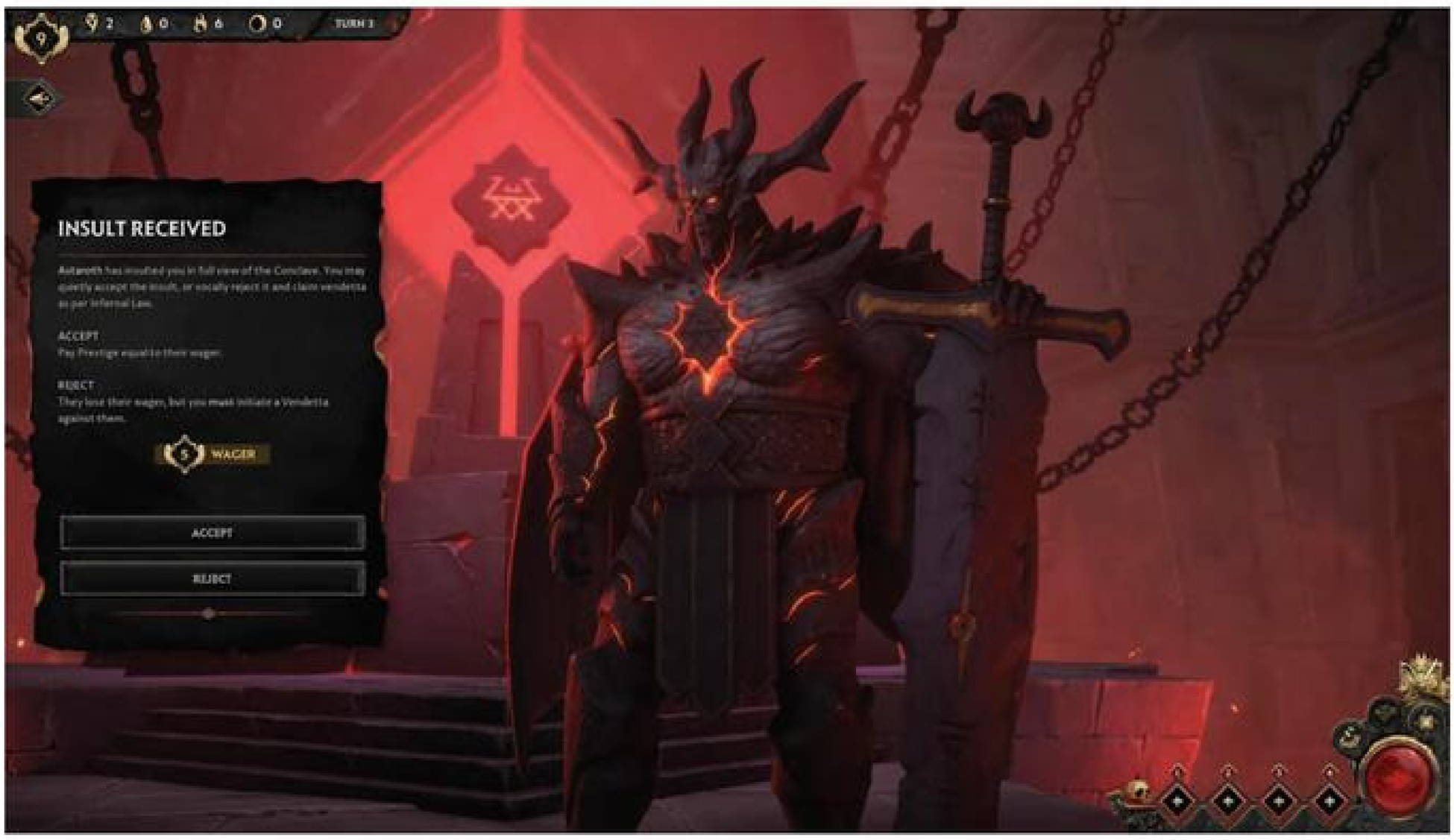
ABOVE: *United 1944*'s battlefields are often pretty, detailed and multi-layered.

LEFT: A player drives me out of house and home, setting fire to my command desk.

Solium Infernum

ABOVE: The Blood of Astaroth legion sets out from my stronghold.

RIGHT: Diplomacy can turn into a slanging match.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Feb 14, 2024	League of Geeks	League of Geeks	soliuminfernum.com

SOLIUM INFERNUM

Satanic strategy with demonic divisions on hellish hexes

Hell may be other people, but getting those presumably extremely unmotivated and uncooperative other people to form into a mighty legion and fight for you must be a difficult undertaking. You can make diabolical threats, of course, but they're already damned and tricky to persuade. Who'd want to rule Hell?

Astaroth would. In *Solium Infernum* (that's 'only hell' for the non-Latin speakers out there) Satan has disappeared, and the remaining top order of demons are left to fight it out for the throne. Hell is, conveniently, divided up into hexes, which turns the infernal regions into the perfect place for a spot of turn-based strategy, with the legions of the damned and their champions zooming about one hex at a time, carving up territory and taking out their frustrations on the local landmarks, which have suitably hellish names such as the Unholy Fountain and the Great Wheel of Pain.

As Astaroth, one of four greater demons vying for the top spot from their own fortress on the map, I start with a legion with an encouraging name: the Blood of Astaroth. After a few moves to carve out some territory – opposing forces can't enter your hexes without the correct diplomatic status, politeness being so important in Hell – I am able to upgrade my legion by bidding on the services of a Praetor, or champion, at the bazaar. This is a blind auction with a minimum bid, so it's possible for an opponent to outbid you without you knowing anything until it's announced who gets the huge bloodthirsty berserker in their army. Clearly no one else is bidding, as I win this one with the lowest amount of outlay – the money coming from tribute swept up by my marching forces – and welcome Bune (six eyes, horns, two tongues and an unreasonable number of teeth) to my legion.

Bune likes to lead from the front, so I wheel my army and lay siege to the Vats of Torment, which seems important as another duke of hell is already firing arrows at it. Each player gets two order slots per turn, and combat plays out in three phases – ranged, melee and infernal – the last of which sees crackling red energies exchanged between the combatants. As the Vats' defenders have already been weakened, I'm able to claim it fairly easily, and the enemy demon Murmur's legion leaves feeling very silly.

COMBAT PLAYS OUT IN THREE PHASES – RANGED, MELEE AND INFERNAL

HELL TO PAY

While all this is going on, an advisor by the name of Belial is urging me to attack a tree. The Tree of Woe is weak, he tells me, and easily conquered, and with a Praetor I could beat it in a single turn. Another piece of advice, coming from somewhere else, informs me that Belial is a pathological liar. Well what did I expect from Hell – reliable narrators?

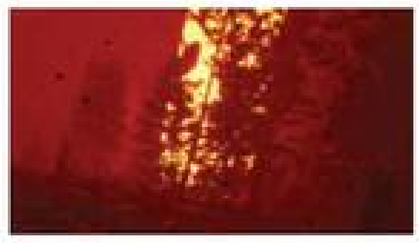
PLAYED IT

The other players in this demo version of the game are AI, but in the final release there will be the opportunity to have real humans take their place. A rotating 'regency' system sees each player crowned regent for a turn, seeing their orders actioned first and getting to play an Event card that can change the course of battles. The player with the most prestige, won by conquering and destroying, is the winner at the end.

The plains and swamps of Hell are a sparse place to battle, but there's enough space to guide your armies and always something new to conquer, if you've got the right diplomatic status to reach it. The game's slow-burn plotting and strategising is a good match for its setting, and there are enough background systems whirring away to promise depth beyond the clash of armies.

Ian Evenden

Pacific Drive



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 22, 2024	Ironwood Studios	Kepler Interactive	pacificdrivegame.com

PACIFIC DRIVE

Take a road trip through mankind's folly

In the mid-20th century it seemed that new science, from DDT to nuclear power, would save us all. By the time the '70s rolled round, the legacy of ignorance, corporate greed and government arrogance was clear. So it was, in one beautiful corner of the Pacific Northwest.

Amongst the redwoods and fir trees, research into a potentially limitless energy source – LIM – unleashed a series of increasingly deadly anomalies. In the end the government evacuated the population, walled off the whole peninsula and left it to descend into eldritch chaos. This is the setting for *Pacific Drive*, a debut first-person driving-survival-adventure game by Seattle-based Ironwood Studios, a proudly anti-crunch group with an eclectic track record in the industry.

A humble delivery driver, you get sucked into the exclusion zone by an escaping red goo vortex, and find yourself sealed inside the Olympic Peninsula's 400ft barrier with no way out. But help is at hand. There's an old radiation-proof station wagon, a safe garage for crafting, upgrades and repairs, and some helpful, albeit caustic, voices to guide you through the zone. Gather resources to fix your car, survive the next outing and find a way home. It also seems that the old station wagon that you are driving is a Remnant, an object of some power. Are you the chosen thingamabob, or what?

THE RISK/REWARD GAME LOOP, ONCE YOU'RE SETTLED INTO IT, IS A GOOD ONE

PLAYED IT

WOULD YOU KINDLY

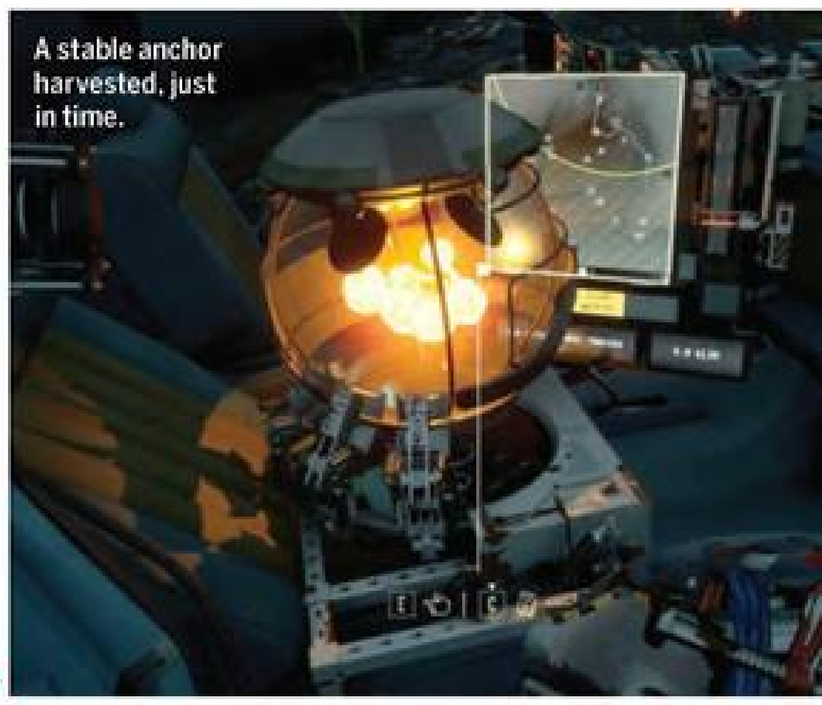
There's nothing truly original going on here, and you could name dozens of games with similar themes, characters and mechanics. But the whole package is delivered with sufficient enthusiasm to make it seem fresh, albeit a moody, earthy, rain-soaked fresh. Tara Langella happily chews the scenery as Ophelia 'Oppy' Turner, ostensibly the scientist behind the pandemonium, but now a voice on the radio guiding you round her abandoned garage. She bickers over the air with Francis and Tobias, the requisite conspiracy theorists, who are there to muddy whatever waters you're being served. Is she GLaDOS, Atlas or Delilah? Only time will tell.

The other voices you hear on the FM radio along with some very beardy tunes are entertaining enough – "I have your lamas" being a highlight – but I was a little perplexed as to who was talking. Were they inside the wall too? Or is the weird leaking out into the lands beyond? Again, I suspect all will become clear, and I'm here for it.

The risk/reward game loop, once you're settled into it, is a good one. To get out of the zone, you have to head out and find resources, and try not to consume more than you reap. You are safe in your car for the most part, but can't stay there if you're going to progress. You can run towards that shack, but you're prey to radiation and passing anomalies. Drive off-road to it and your car suffers. Do you wait for that floaty machine to pass by or drive round it with spinning wheels and skid into a log? Can you leave the car there or will the blue-arcing fungi catch it up? Does that cabin even have anything useful? You know the drill. But one way or another, you'll need to find stable anchors – glowing gold balls – to fuel your car's ARC Device, a cross between a GPS and portal-maker, and call up a way out of the area.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Then, once you use the ARC Device to open a Gateway, the zone will become unstable and contract around you. Sometimes the storm comes, ready or not, leaving you with a shopping list of anchors to gather before you can

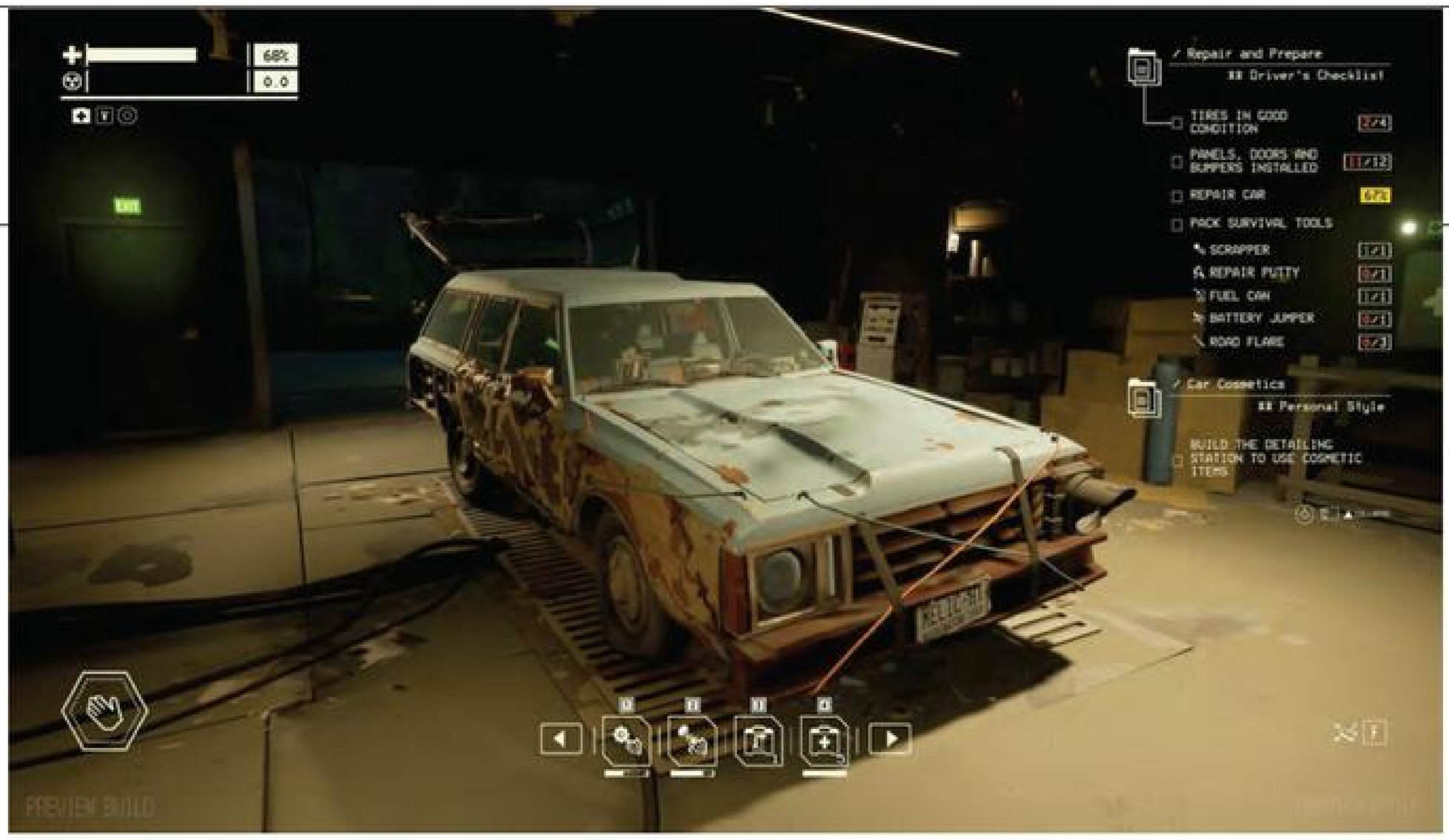


A stable anchor harvested, just in time.

ABOVE: I'm not saying they move, but these dummies weren't there a minute ago.

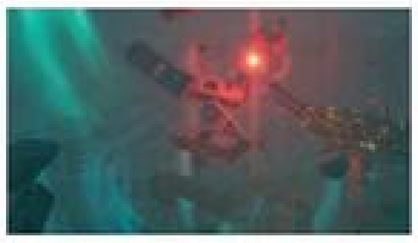
LEFT: Devs who worked on *Bioshock*, unite!

Pacific Drive



RIGHT: Not rubbish. Just a bit characterful.

BELOW: Awkwardly placed ARC machine, in need of charging.



escape, leading to some thrilling chases through a universe coming apart at the seams in stunning fashion.

However, the position of the ARC Device on the passenger seat is very awkward in 16:9. While realistic in some sense – it's a big piece of kit and where else would it go? – trying to drive a flimsy car and check the map, while things stalk you all about, is very disorienting. Maybe that's a feature, not a bug, but I found it all challenging enough already.

In the first instance, I was disappointed that there was mandatory fast travel in a game about driving, especially when the promised road trip boasted such atmospheric surroundings. The game is not truly open-world but a series of semi-stable zones that you're zapped into, and it seems churlish to criticise a game for what it isn't. However, what it often is, is confusing.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

Dying, or rather being snatched from death at the last second and returned to your garage, feels unreasonably punitive, as you lose most of your scavenged parts. This feels unfair, as your death probably came following the instructions of the off-stage voices, with no way to know if the anomalies in your way are deadly or benign until you've driven into them. This often leaves you less able to conquer the mission you just failed, exacerbated by other poorly explained features. I turned on a LIM-powered vacuum that I assumed was a storage device, and hoovered up all my items, only for them to vanish from the bag when I returned. My manual save had updated with the latest checkpoint so there was no going back unless I wanted to start again.

Meanwhile, the crafting is not the most intuitive. Making a bulb, or indeed a 'light fixing kit', won't repair a headlight with a broken bulb and if you're running short of resources, crafting the wrong item can prove fatal. As I played on, I found many answers to my troubles, but a touch more hand-holding, or a little less snark in the logbook, wouldn't go amiss in the early stages.

I'm usually impatient with games that don't explain enough, or make the learning curve too tough – I'm old and time is at a premium – and this instance made me realise how much we've all come to rely on online guides to get us over the bumps in our games. At one point, I was standing in a garage trying to install a new wheel and replacing it with the same flat one over and over again. I eventually scrapped the wheel, causing not insignificant damage to the rest of the car. Had I not had to continue, I might have stopped there.

However, there's a lot you can finagle in the settings once you know they're there, from making death less annoying to making driving easier, and the comprehensive suite of accessibility tools should be commended. Go, Ironwood.

KNOWING THE SYSTEMS BETTER, I GOT INTO A SATISFYING GROOVE

BACK FOR SECONDS

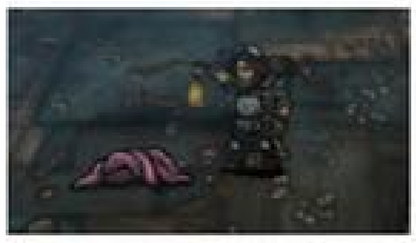
By my second run through, knowing the systems better, I got into a satisfying groove. I even left all the impediments in place. Knowing the punishment for failure was so severe gave every action an extra significance, and the initially irritating car-wrangling steps showed their value. Those panicky seconds turning the ignition, not waiting long enough, having to repeat the process, and only then remembering to put the car in gear, all while something dayglo yellow oozed towards me... these moments proved to be a highlight.

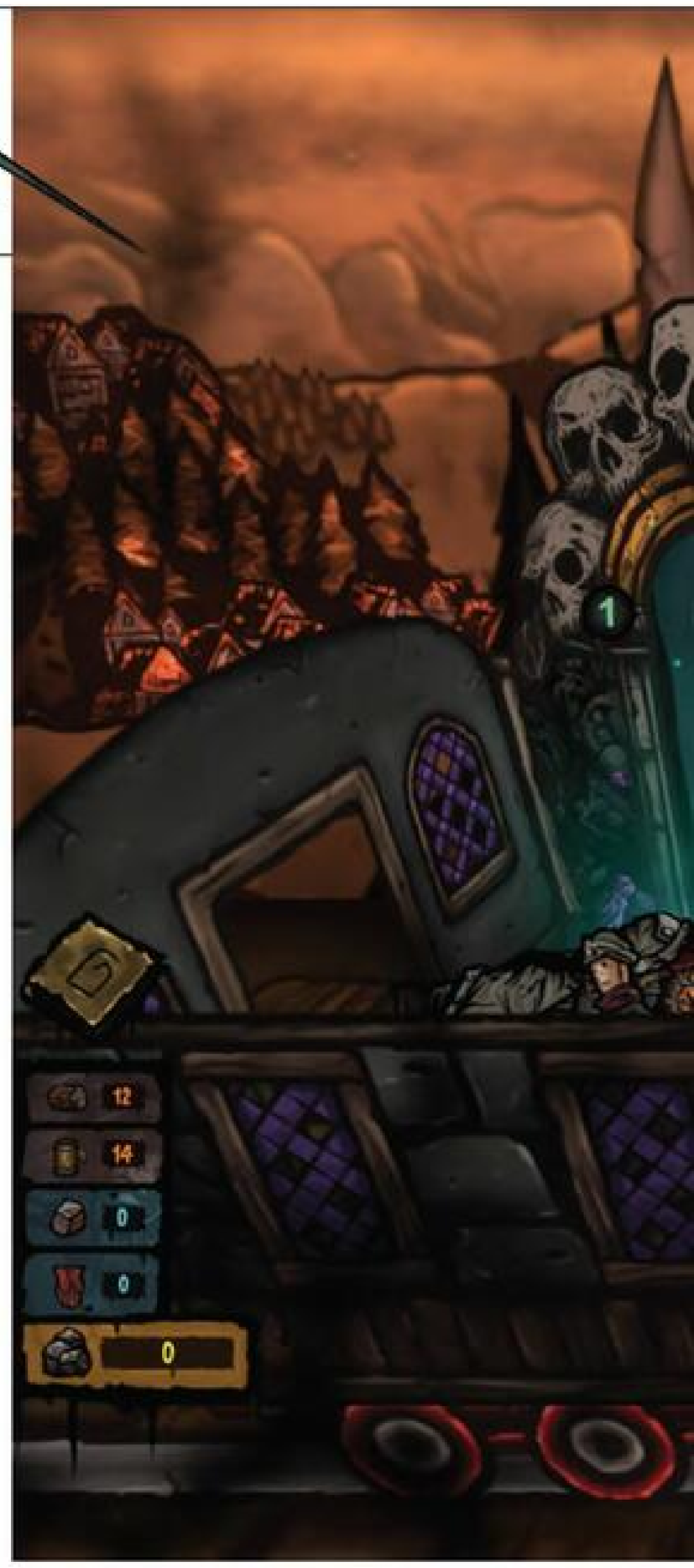
And the atmosphere is exactly what you want for this kind of game. Graphically it's pretty without being groundbreaking, just stylised enough to accept the conceit, just realistic enough to give you the odd chill. Sonically there are all the moody vibes and unearthly noises, and the radio can be tuned to different stations, even if they all seem much the same. Given all this, the general cloying and spooky sense of dread comes free.

I'd say that if this looks like your thing, it probably is, and the accumulated inconveniences are outshone by the possibilities. It might well become a bit samey, but there's just enough emergent gameplay potential there given the variety of anomalies loose in the woods. You think you've got it sussed then you're suddenly *flying*. The preview officially finished after two story missions, and a very nice set-piece finish, yet I still headed out again to see what I could find now I was in my groove. The longer you spend in the Olympic Peninsula, the more sense the senselessness makes. I want answers, I like trees, and, even if it kills me, this car will have five matching doors.

Matt Killeen

Railroads & Catacombs





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Sep 15, 2023 (Early Access)	Felipe Aulló	IndieArk	railroadsandcatacombs.com

RAILROADS & CATACOMBS

The roads are rails, but you cannot comb the cat

The name may conjure images of a goth railway management game in which you transport skeletons between the ossuaries beneath Paris, but in reality *Railroads & Catacombs* has far more in common with *Darkest Dungeon* than *Train Sim Underworld*. Although that actually sounds like an excellent idea for a game.

Instead of a carriage or staircase to convey you between areas, here you're on a train. It's a rickety locomotive that requires coal, scavenged from your victories in the field, and it gradually fills with characters and extra cars as you travel and upgrade. New recruits come through a portal to replace those lost in the wilds surrounding the track, while decks can be fiddled with or have cards removed by a Railmancer, who has his own carriage.

As a roguelite card battler, you choose your destination depending on the difficulty you want to encounter, then send a character (each with different strengths and available cards, and who can be upgraded via various Warpaths) to explore a series of interconnected squares, which may contain enemies to fight, a boss, something valuable or something mysterious. The mysterious statues hand out new cards and upgrades, while the items of value generally turn out to be supplies, used for upgrading the train or aiding your character, though the weird pink lumps labelled 'tongues', used in research, hint at a more complex system behind the pickups.

The gothic horror aesthetic and even the 3D cutout art style are reminiscent of *Darkest Dungeon*, but what sets it apart from that game and *Slay the Spire* is the importance of 3D positioning during combat. While you can't move your character around using WASD as you do when exploring a map, cards such as Move Away, Jump and Crush – which moves you a space forward as you attack, forcing the enemy back – are important so you're not standing in a square that's going to be filled with something nasty – like the gloriously named Brown Rain – in the next turn. These spaces are easily spotted due to the red hatching applied to them, so being caught in one is always entirely your own fault.

ATTACK EFFECTIVELY

Being out of position also makes it harder to attack effectively, so getting into and out of the right place on the grid becomes more important than just unloading all your offensive cards then popping on some armour when you're down to one last action. I became fond of my train's engineer, whose Premonition cards allow him to attack enemies when they attack, and lead to a flurry of ranged counterattacks on the enemy turn, so you can deal as much damage by laying in wait with a shield up as you can by heading into melee. That's not to say his gigantic wrench isn't an effective weapon, but simple attack cards came up much less frequently than they did when using the soldier character.

PLAYED IT

Battles go by as quickly as you can press the turn-end button. Victory conditions are often based on doing damage but not necessarily killing the enemies, meaning you're not left picking off stragglers. And because you're always able to see where the enemies are on the map, you're able to avoid them until you're ready, picking up extra cards and making camp to reduce the Sanity meter that affects whether you get the first turn.

As an early access game from a solo dev, we might expect *Railroads & Catacombs* to lack polish, but it's currently looking remarkably well crafted and surely chugging toward the end of its EA period.

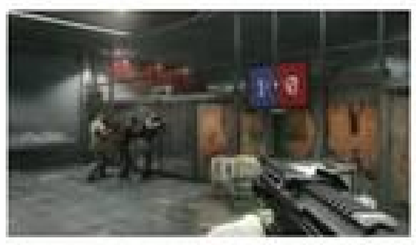
Ian Evenden

CHOOSE YOUR DESTINATION DEPENDING ON THE DIFFICULTY YOU WANT TO ENCOUNTER

ABOVE: Your train crew can be very sleepy.

LEFT: The number of hitpoints you're going to lose is helpfully displayed.

Escape From Tarkov: Arena



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 17, 2023	Battlestate Games	Battlestate Games	arena.tarkov.com

ESCAPE FROM TARKOV: ARENA

A back-to-basics shooter that punishes mistakes

E*scape From Tarkov* has some of the most satisfying gun fights in any shooter, with one well-placed bullet being all you need to win a fight and a map design that makes positioning key, so it makes sense to make a game that is all about that experience.

Escape From Tarkov: Arena is that game. Built on the same engine as the regular *Tarkov* and using all the same systems, it could be classed as a new mode that is being sold as a separate title. But this is *Tarkov* as you have never seen it before. Without the large maps, the focus on looting and the fear of losing your best gear *Arena* gives you the chance to shoot people to your heart's content, and it does it incredibly well.

The best way to describe *Escape From Tarkov: Arena* is to imagine if *Call of Duty*'s multiplayer was dropped into the *Tarkov* engine and world. Small to medium-sized maps featuring two teams fighting it out to eliminate the other or secure an objective. There are no abilities, no in-match economy and no storyline to worry about, it's a barebones shooter by today's standards that is just about shooting other people in the face.

PLAYED IT

A UNIQUE FORMAT

In the beta, there are two modes available, but both are essentially the same thing with different player numbers. Rounds start out with a minute and a half of combat, where your only objective is to eliminate the enemy team, if after that time each team still has some players standing an objective opens up that a team must capture by standing on it. If after another 45 seconds each team still has players alive and the objective has not been captured, a squad of AI-controlled characters swarm the map to try and kill all the remaining players, effectively forcing the round to end.

It's a slightly inelegant solution to the problem of players just camping until a round ends, but these multi-stage rounds are much more strategic than just a standard team deathmatch shooter. You'll need to work together to clear angles, and running with teammates is the most effective way to make sure you can trade kills and not give away a freebie to the enemy team. As rounds progress it doesn't become a fight for where the objective will be, it becomes a fight for the best vantage point of the objective, as capturing will leave you exposed. There's more thought required when it comes to positioning than you find in a similar game.

Teamfight is the mode I've gravitated towards the most, which is a 5v5 best-of-seven competition that typically lasts around 15 minutes. Shootout is a 2v2 or 3v3 variation of this formula that instead of being a match between two teams, is a round-robin tournament with the top two teams at the end playing a best-of-three final. Maps are shrunk down and things are much slower with players holding angles and waiting for someone to make a move.

The larger team matches are quick enough that you are never stuck in a losing game for too long, but long enough to give you a feeling of achievement if you win a close match. The Shootout tournaments on the other hand can feel long if you are matched against better players, especially as you have to sit out and watch other rounds when you aren't in a battle.

TIME TO FIGHT

When you are in somewhat evenly matched fights you get the same rush that the normal *Tarkov* experience will give you. When you aren't killed by a single bullet from across the map, which is great fun if you are doing the killing and not so much fun if you are on the receiving end, then fights feel tense and much more than who can just spray the most bullets at the

A 5V5 BEST-OF-SEVEN COMPETITION THAT TYPICALLY LASTS AROUND 15 MINUTES

For the first time in the *Tarkov* universe, you can see exactly how someone killed you.

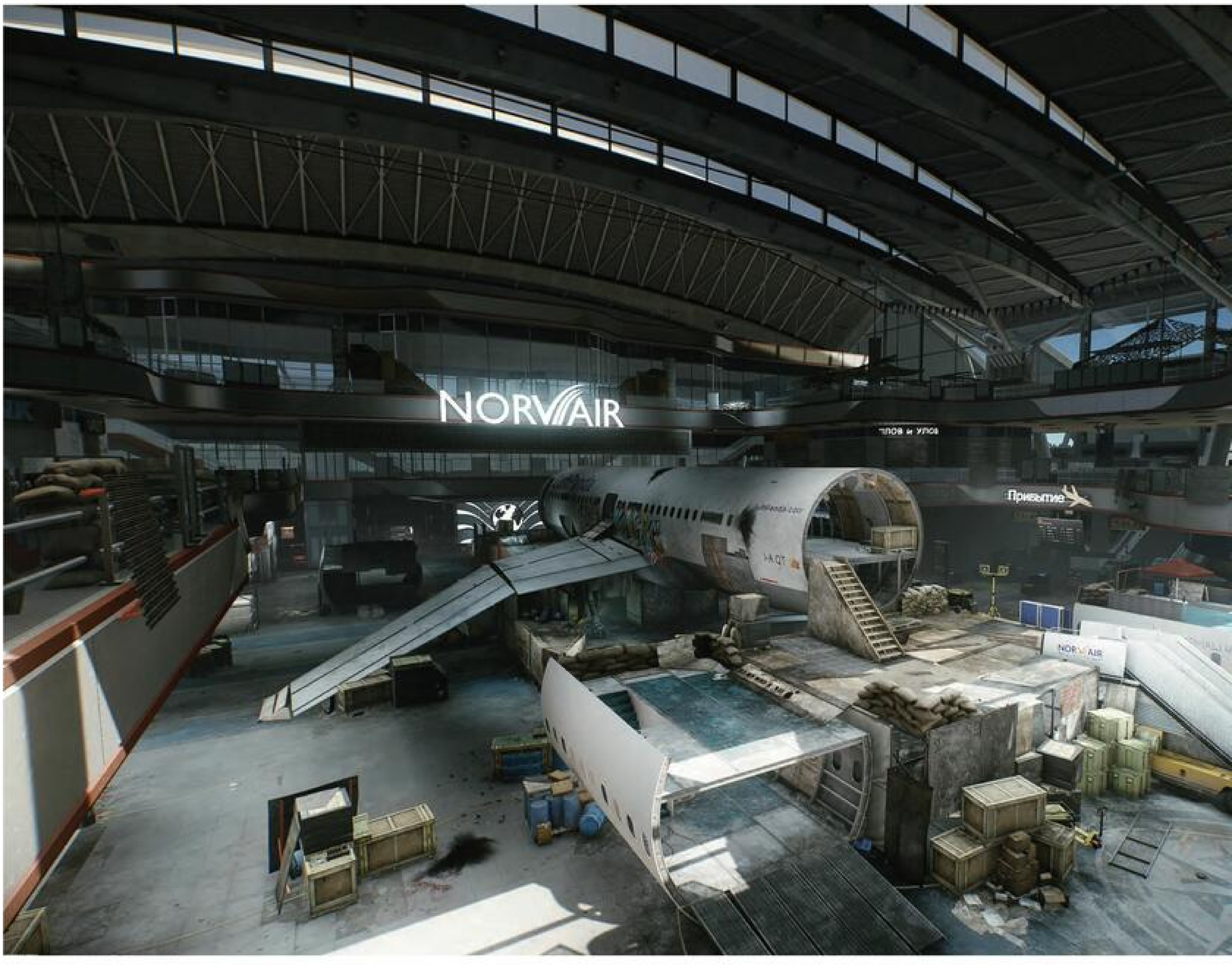
ABOVE: All it takes is one well-placed bullet to turn a fight in your favour.

LEFT: Controlling the best vantage point of an objective is crucial.

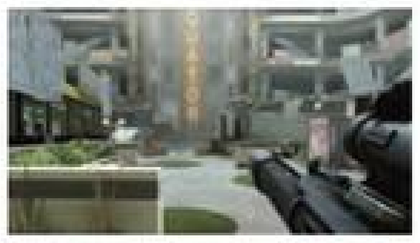
Escape From Tarkov: Arena

RIGHT: You get to watch matches from the stands in the Shootout game mode.

BELOW: All the maps feel different despite mostly being of a similar size thanks to unique locations.



Escape From Tarkov: Arena



target. Peeking and holding angles while you can hear someone moving on the other side gets the heart rate pumping and you'll have to have quick reactions to hit them in the face before they do.

If you can play with a team that has some comms and coordination, *Tarkov: Arena* really comes into its own, with actual strategy and team positioning making a big difference. In a competitive match where the pace is fairly slow and each kill really matters, I'd go so far as to say this is the most fun experience I've had in a shooter in a long time. Combat feels great and it's very barebones, if you hit your shots you are likely to win and there isn't much else to it, which is a refreshing change from almost every other shooter that throws in abilities or complex grenades.

However, solo play with a team of random players has proven less fun. Running around as a solo trying to take on the world can work and you will for sure see a lot of people trying to be Superman in matchmaking, but more times than not, you're going to come up against two players in close proximity and your chances of winning that fight are slim at best. So I worry about the longevity *Arena* has for solo players, especially with many players not using the voice comms.

PUZZLING PRESETS

Fighting is, for the most part, great, but it is outside of the actual playing of the game where *Arena* in its current state starts to fall down. *Escape From Takrov* has a massive arsenal of weapons with some of the deepest customisation options in any game, but *Arena* has none of that. Instead, you are limited to Presets, a loadout of gear predetermined by the dev team, that has no customisation options. For balance reasons you can see why this choice was made, because with complete freedom to build whatever loadout you wanted, players would quickly figure out the strongest weapons and they would be the only ones used. But having no customisation in the *Tarkov* universe feels wrong, and surely a system where you have a set amount of money or another limiting factor to build a setup would feel like a more natural fit.

HAVING NO CUSTOMISATION IN THE TARKOV UNIVERSE FEELS WRONG

Then there's the process of how you unlock these Presets. You'll start out with basic ones for each specialist tree, with different ones for close-quarter combat, long-range snipers fast fast-firing SMGs. You'll need to use a preset to earn XP with it, to then unlock the next preset in the tree, the higher up the tree they are the stronger weapons you get. Each Preset has an MP score dictating how strong it is, and after a lot of backlash at the start of the beta, matchmaking will now take into account the average MP score from your previous few matches and match you with people of similar kits.

In theory, this means you shouldn't come up against people with outright better weapons than you, and when that was the case it was borderline unplayable for anyone who wasn't grinding all day. But it still presents some problems, most notably that because of the time it takes to unlock the next preset (which can be a lot) you will likely start grinding up one unlock tree. But then if you want to switch to a new one, you are going to have to play some games where people have flat-out better guns because your MP score from previous matches will be high while you are now at the start of a new tree.

The simple solution is to have people select their preset before matchmaking, so you never get a situation where there are players who are almost unkillable because they have the strongest armour in the game and you are effectively throwing paperclips at them with an underpowered weapon.

POTENTIALLY GREAT

You'd hope that these issues will eventually be ironed out before a full launch, but right now the systems that should be there to keep you playing and offer progression are actually the most off-putting unless you love to grind for hours to unlock one new weapon. But if you can get past that *Escape From Tarkov: Arena* has the potential to be a top shooter that can offer hours of entertainment.

The actual fights combined with the interesting rounds make this a fun shooter with a high skill ceiling to reach. It offers tense *Tarkov*-style combat in a format where it is guaranteed to happen and you don't have to worry about losing your good loot. Even if you have never played *Escape From Takrov* before, but are a fan of shooters that keep it simple then this is worth a shot and if *Arena* follows the same path as the original it will only get better.

Mike Stubbs

Updating **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** is a mammoth task, but this year Riot Games has taken more risks than usual

By Mike Stubbs

CREA

YASUO

A

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS RIFT

After

After almost 15 years, *League of Legends* remains one of the most popular PC games in the world, boasting over 100 million players every month. But keeping a game fresh and exciting for that long is no easy task, especially with so many people to please, so Riot Games has taken some risks with the new 2024 season.

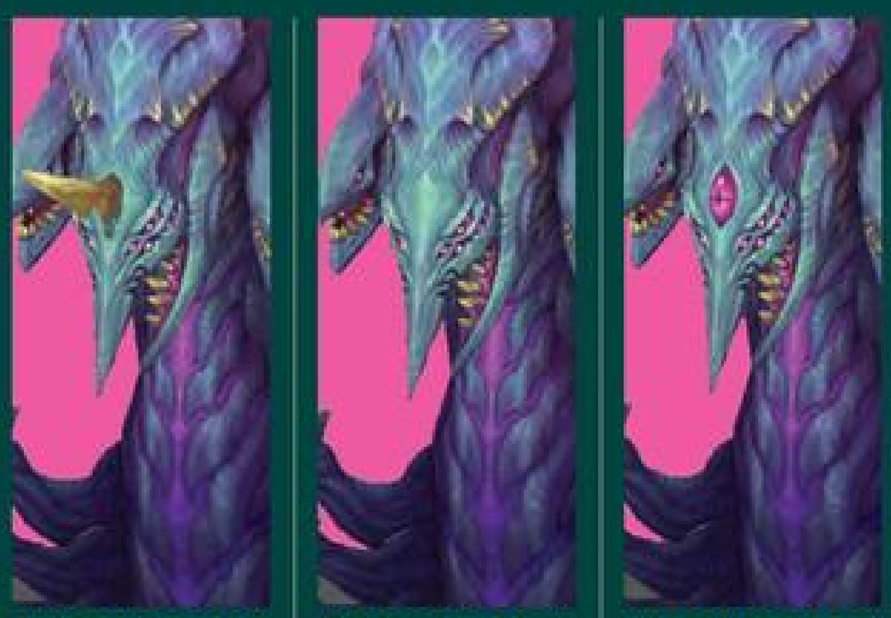
Updating *League of Legends* is not simple at the best of times. With millions of players to keep happy ,each patch has to improve things in some way but not break everything that players love. Throughout most of the year the risks are minimal for a new patch, with one arriving every two weeks Riot tends to keep them relatively small, making balance changes and introducing one or two new things at once, be it a new champion, game mode or a change to a system. It is, usually, only once a year when a lot of big changes are made all at once, and that is with the launch of a new season.

Andrei 'Meddler' van Roon joined Riot Games in 2011 as a champion designer, before the idea of seasons was even in place and the focus was just on adding more and more content to the game. But after a while, he and the dev team started to realise that just adding more and more content all the time wasn't a sustainable option, and that they would need to change strategy a little.

"Over time we gradually refined [the update system] and realised, this works well for players if we turn off [ranked matchmaking] right at the end of the year, we make a bunch of changes, then we turn it back on once the game is a bit more stabilised," explains van Roon, who has risen through the ranks and is now head of League Studio, overseeing all of the games built internally at Riot in the *League of Legends* universe.

MEET THE NEW BARONS

With three new Barons to take down you need to know who you are up against



HUNTING BARON
The Hunting Baron keeps the pit you know, but will punish enemies that group together too closely.

TERRITORIAL BARON
Opens his pit up to have two entrances but will deal a lot of damage, so you need to be quick to get out of the way.

ALL-SEEING BARON
The All-Seeing Baron makes his pit a long corridor with big walls, making it harder to escape if you need to run.

This was the format for a new *League of Legends* season for years. Around November time the previous season would end and ranked matchmaking would be turned off, which for some players would mean it was time to take a break. Van Roon says this was "a pretty healthy cycle" for players, but for many, it meant that, when all the fun new features dropped, there was little competitive reward to try them out.

COMPARED TO OTHER YEARS THERE WAS A LOT MORE HYPE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY FOR THE NEW SEASON

At the same time, the new pre-season patch would launch, which included all the major changes coming for the new season, but with the caveat that this was more of a test period than a full launch. This gave the team almost two months to figure out what needed to be changed, before properly launching the new season in January, which often just amounted to turning ranked play back on. It's a system that worked for a while, but in the current age of live service games, it started to feel dated.

"I think there's still some benefit to the more yearly cycle in some ways," says van Roon. "But having the big changes once a year and some extended quieter periods through the year is not necessarily what players are looking for. And if we're going through that disruptive [pre-season] period anyway, should we just bundle everything together and really prioritise rapid follow-up? So that's what we're trying this year."

TOP: The map may have changed, but you'll still find enemies farming the same places.

LEFT: A lot of changes have been made to make top laners more impactful and make the lane a true 1v1.

Having learnt from the likes of *Valorant*, *Wild Rift* and *Teamfight Tactics*, and the hype those games generate by dropping a lot of new content all at once, the *League of Legends* team took a risk with Season 2024. Pre-season was totally removed and, instead, the first time players got to experience all the new additions was when it launched on January 10, complete with ranked matchmaking.

Compared to other years there was a lot more hype within the community for the new season. Not only had they had to wait longer to try it out, but they could also play the full *LoL* experience complete with ranked matches from day one, leading to some chaotic games as everyone tried to figure out the best ways to play. Even for those with more on the line than just rank, the change has been well received.

"[Our preparation] has been very different since solo queue did not have the map we will play on," says Rasmus 'Caps' Winther, a professional player for G2 Esports, the most successful European *LoL* team ever. "I have been playing only in-houses with other [pro] players instead of solo queue, which has been longer but a lot of fun since we have voice comms and we were all trying out the new items and map. For sure, we are not as prepared as usual, but neither is our opponent and it will be crazy to see everyone's read on the meta the first few weeks if not months."

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

When it comes to figuring out just what those big changes each season will be, the team is always thinking up new ideas, but the real work typically starts around February. The first phase of development is collating all the ideas members of the team have, which happens on a massive whiteboard where everything, good or bad, is added.

From there the team leads consider all the options, before choosing which ones to progress to the next stage, which is discovery. While a new season will have a handful of key changes each year, for 2024 there are three main areas targeted, at the discovery stage this will be considerably more as many will not work out, or just prove not to be a priority as the development progresses. For example, back in February 2023, the team tested out changes to make split pushing more viable and updating teleport, but neither made it out of the discovery stage and have been banked as possible items to return to in the future.

"We're building this backlog of problems and opportunities to solve," says Matthew 'Riot Phroxzon' Leung-Harrison, lead gameplay designer on *LoL* who ultimately has the final say on what is included in a new season. "There's a lot of stuff that we evaluate, there are always these types of things that we will throw into discovery, see if it works out. If it doesn't, then we'll just cut our losses and move to something else. By the end of this period, we're like OK what are the opportunities that we feel have the potential to go the distance?"

At this stage, the team can't talk publicly about what they will be changing with a new season, so they have to rely on their knowledge and others within the studio to make sure these changes fit what they are looking to achieve. While there's a massive group of testers at Riot, and almost every member of staff plays *League* in some way, it's still a relatively small sample size of the *League* player base. Sometimes that means ideas the team thinks are great turn out to not be loved by the community at large.

"Sometimes we're gonna fuck up," says van Roon. "We're a live game, we're gonna make rapid changes. If we get something substantially wrong, we'll follow up on that pretty quickly. I think it's one of the blessings and curses of being able to patch every two weeks. We can

DISCOVER THE NEW BOT LANE

An old favourite gets some big changes this season

1 WARD BRUSH
This new brush is the perfect place for wards as it always gives vision of the red side tri-brush above.

2 TRI BRUSH
The red side now resembles the blue side to make things more even and give junglers a better gank route.

3 THE CLASSIC
This is still the bot lane you know and love, but minor changes above make it a riskier place to play.

afford to take more risks, but sometimes that means we're gonna have to rapidly address or revert things."

One example both van Roon and Leung-Harrison pointed to was the release of the Chemtech Drake in the 2022 season. Initially launching as part of the pre-season patch in November 2021, the dragon type was removed by the end of January, with players finding it frustrating rather than fun. It didn't return until the following pre-season patch in November.

THE CHANGES MAY NOT SEEM SIGNIFICANT, THIS IS STILL THE SUMMONER'S RIFT YOU KNOW

FIXING MISTAKES

With the lessons learnt from that experience, Riot chose Season 2024 as the time to address another system that has missed the mark: mythic items. Initially introduced in 2021, mythic items were the most powerful items you could get in *League of Legends*, each with a unique ability that was designed to suit a small handful of champions to really allow them to hit their peak.

"I was part of the crew that was doing mythic items that year and at the time there were a lot of pros that we saw," says Leung-Harrison. "It was an understandable choice for players and we thought that the tier of item above legendary was something that players would find exciting."

Unlike the Chemtech Drake, the backlash to mythic items wasn't immediate. As a cool new feature, everyone wanted to try out these new powerful items and more times than not they would feel great to use, adding even more power and cool abilities to *League of Legends*. But over time it started to become clear that they didn't work for all the champions in the game, and a knock-on of that was that new champions had to be designed to fit one of these powerful items, limiting some creativity for that team.

"60 to 70% of champions felt good with the mythic item system, maybe even like 80%, but there were 20% of the champions that just feel really bad," says Leung-Harrison. "The only champions that were perceived as good, were champions that had mythic items that worked for them. That's when we started to realise, oh, maybe we've dug ourselves a bit of a hole here."

The first attempt to dig themselves out of the hole was trying to introduce more mythic items that would plug the gaps the original system had, but this was just "stemming the bleeding" according to Leung-Harrison. It was also making *League*, a notoriously difficult game to learn, even harder to understand with all the new items.

This eventually led to the point where the team knew mythic items needed an overhaul, which arrived with the 2024 season. The result is a brand-new item system where the old mythic items have been removed, or adjusted to be less powerful options. Over 100 items have been changed, added or removed as part of the patch, making it one of the biggest item overhauls ever.

The early signs are good, and some forgotten champions are already starting to come back into the meta, but this is a system with so many changes that it is going to take weeks if not months to balance everything to a reasonable standard.

CHANGING THE PLAYING FIELD

While the item changes were all about fixing an old system, the other two core areas of the 2024 season were more about adding new content to *LoL* and making matches feel fresh. The most noticeable change for everyone is the new look Summoner's Rift, which has been given some small but impactful tweaks, hopefully making the map more even for each side.

The changes may not seem significant, this is still the Summoner's Rift you know, just with new walls being added to make the red top lane mirror the blue side, the brushes in the mid lane being moved back and the red bot side getting a new entrance into the river to match what the blue side has. But all of these changes serve some very important adjustments to how the game is played.

RIGHT: Baron fights require more focus with all the skills he now has.

In the top lane, the goal, along with some other changes, was to make top laners feel more impactful in every game and reduce how much ganks can mess with them. In mid, moving the brushes back is an attempt to make more champions viable in the lane, specifically those who suffer from being ganked and have low mobility. The bot lane is more of a response to the top lane changes, giving blue-side junglers somewhere to gank now the top is harder to reach.

It's also an area that takes a lot more work than you might think. Reworking an entire item system or adding brand-new monsters obviously brings a lot of work, but moving some walls and brushes around seems like something that would take less time and resources. In reality, these changes take massive resources, even going down to figuring out the best single pixel to place a new object.

"We placed the specifics of the bot lane river brush so that wards in it will always see the entrance to the red side brush from the river, no matter where you place it in the brush," says Ezra 'Phlox' Lynn, game designer on *LoL*. "This took a lot of fine tweaking."

MORE PURPLE MONSTERS!

The map changes combine with some key adjustments and new additions to the monsters you will find on Summoner's Rift to make the environment you play on feel very different to last season. Many of the monsters on the Rift have been given new void-themed makeovers, basically making them a bit stronger and more purple, and the fan favourite new addition is the Voidgrubs that are now found in the Baron pit during the early stages of the game. These cute little guys are again an attempt to make top laners have a better time, giving them an objective to take early and on their own, and an early concept had them as cultist cats.

But for the team, there was one feature they were determined to make work; being able to ride the Rift Herald. With the addition of the Voidgrubs taking its place in the very early game, there were some ideas thrown around on how to make the Herald more impactful given it will now appear less often. The one that started things out, was being able to jump in and control the Herald and all its abilities.

"We threw it in the test and we were like, this is really fun," says Leung-Harrison. "It was sitting in the test [build] for maybe a month or a month and a half, and people were playing it, but then we were like, oh, man, this is kind of getting old."

In the initial version, if you were jumped by enemies you could suddenly become this giant creature with a massive health pool and can run away relatively quickly, which is just annoying for anyone playing against it. But instead of scrapping the feature, as many testers wanted, the people behind it and its supporters, one of which was Leung-Harrison, thought it could work in some format, so went back to the drawing board.

Around a month later they came back with the version of the feature that shipped. Instead of becoming the herald, now you can jump on its back, choose a direction for it to charge in and loosely control it as it runs. It's no longer the instant safety net that it was in its first iteration, but it does add a fun new option of how to use the Herald.

"That ended up testing a lot better," says Leung-Harrison. "Like it kept the essence of what we were trying to do with the thing while narrowing down what types of abusive stuff it could do."

The final big change when it comes to the monsters is to Baron, the big purple worm who is the most powerful creature on the Rift. For almost ten years Baron has remained largely the same, a powerful monster that takes an entire team to kill but offers a massive buff to your minions when slain. All that is still true, but now three potential variations of Baron can spawn, and they all have a unique skill set.

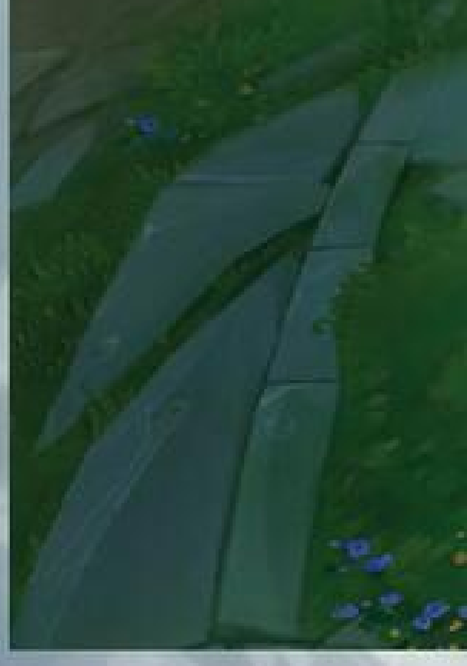
The new Barons are a change designed to offer a little more randomness to *League*. It's never going to be game-deciding, but certain lineups might have a better time taking one type or another or at least have advantages in one of the new pits compared to others. It makes taking down Baron something you need to think about more.

LOOKING AHEAD

The initial reaction to the launch of the 2024 season has been mostly positive, and there is no doubt that the new system of launching everything at once and doing away with pre-season has worked out for fans. This has been one of the most anticipated new seasons in years and fans seem to be generally happy with all the big changes, which these days is a rarity.

For the team at Riot, the next few weeks are all about refining the changes they have just made and looking more generally at how they impact the game. What they discover will likely lead to some of the changes we will see this time next year, but already there are some ideas the team are discussing. Teleport and split pushing are back on the menu as areas to look at, the success of the Baron changes has raised the question of whether Dragon fights can be made more dynamic, and some even want to change how the bases look. Next year we could see all, or even none, of these released, but there's a long way to go before that arrives.

NOW THREE POTENTIAL VARIATIONS OF BARON CAN SPAWN, AND THEY ALL HAVE A UNIQUE SKILL SET



TOP: There's no feeling quite like destroying the Nexus in *LoL*.

LEFT: Riding the Rift Herald is the most fun addition this season.

WHAT COULD 2025 BRING?

Despite the new season just launching, the team already has ideas for 2025

TELEPORT CHANGES

Teleport "leads to some stagnation in pro play" according to the devs, so it's on the list of things to explore further.

SPLIT PUSHING

Split pushing was on the agenda for 2024 but was cut early on, so 2025 could be the year it gets an overhaul to make it viable.

NEW BASES

After years of looking the same, 2025 could be the year we get a visual overhaul of the bases and how they are set up.

DRAGONS

After the success of Baron changes this year, the team wants to see if they can do the same for Dragons next year.

TRYDAMERE

THE HISTORY OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

With **GRAND THEFT AUTO VI** finally, officially revealed. PCPP charts the rise, rise, and rise of one of gaming's biggest series

By Rick Lane

Hello doctor? Tiny cars are driving on the bathroom wall again!

1997

Grand Theft Auto

Where it all began

The project that became *Grand Theft Auto* began life as an isometric fighting simulator similar to *Syndicate Wars*. Too similar, in fact. When Bullfrog made its sci-fi sequel public, *GTA*'s developer DMA Design changed trajectory, coming up with a plan for a top-down vehicle game called *Race 'n' Chase*.

Race 'n' Chase's design document describes it as "a fun, addictive and fast multiplayer car racing and crashing game". But the defining lines in the document have little to do with racing. "It will also be possible for players to get out of their car and steal another one," the document reads. "This will mean controlling a vulnerable pedestrian for a short time. Trying to steal a car may result in an alarm being set off which will, of course, attract the police." *Grand Theft Auto*'s top-down blend of 2D sprites and 3D buildings was cutting edge when development started in 1995. But by the time it released in November 1997, the game was visually outdated. Combined with awkward controls, reviews of the game were decidedly mixed. Even DMA's own developers thought the project was unlikely to succeed, with former DMA dev Colin MacDonald admitting there "wasn't a lot of confidence" in the game.

But *Grand Theft Auto* had something that precious few games did in 1997 – a sense of freedom. Yes, you could progress through the game's linear sequence of missions. But you could also make money by stealing cars and selling them at the local docks, run over pedestrians just for the hell of it, and lead the police on a merry chase. This freedom shone through the game's rough visuals and controls, propelling *Grand Theft Auto* to commercial success.

1999

Grand Theft Auto: London

He's nicked my motor!

In 1998, DMA Design's parent company BMG Interactive was acquired by Take Two Interactive, and a new publishing label named Rockstar Games was established under former BMG executive producer Sam Houser. Rockstar's first project was *GTA: London 1969*, a period mission pack for *Grand Theft Auto* developed by Rockstar Canada.

Essentially the same game with a '60s skin, *GTA London* received the same criticisms as the original, although it was praised for its soundtrack which captured the vibe of '60s London. *GTA: London* also sees Dan Houser's debut as the series' chief writer, becoming a much more significant role as the series progressed. The expansion was followed in short order by *GTA: London 1961*. Set eight years earlier and featuring the same protagonist, 1961 was a PC exclusive release available for free by download only.

THE HISTORY OF

grand theft auto

1999

Grand Theft Auto 2

Back to the future

Grand Theft Auto 2's futuristic setting makes the game a curious outlier in retrospect. But the choice of setting made more sense at the time. The series had just spawned two expansions set in the past, so why not place the sequel in the distant year of 2013?

Set in the imaginatively named Anywhere City, *GTA 2* is a fascinating artefact, straddling the line between DMA's original concept and how the series would be envisioned by the Housers. While it uses the same ramshackle engine of the first game, new elements like comedic radio stations and a live-action intro exhibit a flashiness that would become central to later *Grand Theft Auto* games. The sequel also features a fascinating Respect system that divides the city into different factions, with the player's actions in the world affecting their reputation with those organisations.

2001

Grand Theft Auto III

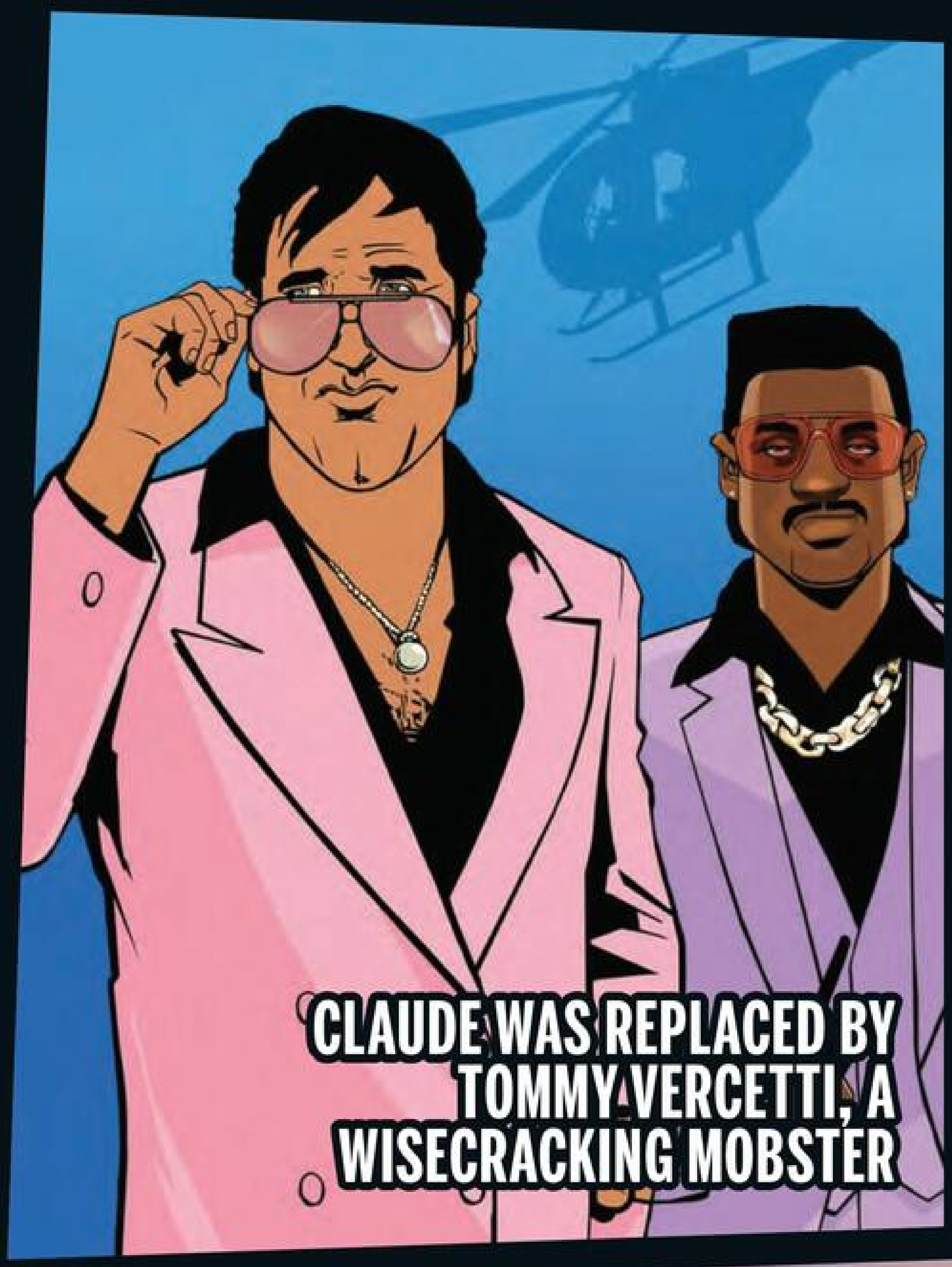
Hitting the big time

It had always been DMA's ideal to make *Grand Theft Auto* a fully 3D game. But back in 1995, the technical demands had been too prohibitive to render a 3D city of any meaningful size. With the sequel, the studio had experimented with full 3D prototypes, but had ultimately chosen to stick with the top-down perspective. With the advent of the PlayStation 2, however, Rockstar and DMA felt the hardware was now capable of meeting their ambitions.

The goal of *GTA III* was simply to convert the freeform anarchy of previous games into 3D. This was exciting enough in and of itself. But the third game still finds space to add several new features, like bespoke minigames for taxis and police cars, drivable boats and even an (extremely hard to control) plane. But beyond the move to 3D, the most significant additions *GTA III* makes are tonal rather than mechanical. It's here that the series begins to develop its cinematic aspirations, introducing a more involved story inspired by gangster fiction like Scorsese movies and The Sopranos, told through mo-capped animated cutscenes.

It's also here where the acerbic social satire is brought to the fore of the series, most notably in ChatterboxFM's hour-long loop of radio chat show, hosted by real-life radio talk-show host Lazlow Jones. Cowritten by Jones and Dan Houser, ChatterboxFM took roughly five months to create, and would come to be one of the most fondly remembered aspects of the third game.

GTA III would go on to be a huge success, selling 14.5 million copies. And this time, the critical reception backed those sales up, with game receiving glowing reviews. The series may have been around for several years at this point, but *GTA* as we know it today was born here.



2002

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

A Ray of sunshine

Although *GTA III* was a huge leap forward for the series, there were still areas where the newly renamed Rockstar North could clearly improve. While technically impressive, Liberty City lacked definition as an urban space, having only become based on New York midway through development. The protagonist Claude wasn't much of a character either, a silent protagonist with no personality.

These were the issues Rockstar sought to address with *Vice City*, and it did so in spectacular fashion. *Vice City* swapped the grey skyscrapers of Liberty City for the sun-soaked beaches and neon-lit nightclubs of an alt-history 1980s Miami. Meanwhile, the voiceless Claude was replaced by Tommy Vercetti, a wisecracking mobster sporting a Hawaiian shirt and a vocal performance by none other than Ray Liotta. Combined with improved storytelling, mission design and possibly the best selection of music in the whole series, *Vice City* remains one of Rockstar's finest hours.

GTA got better looking, but was it ever really this stylish again?

2004

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

A new State of affairs

Grand Theft Auto had always aspired to create, in the words of former Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies, a "living, breathing 3D world". *San Andreas* was the first entry to commit to the 'living' part. Expanding the scope to an entire fictional US state rather than a single city, *San Andreas* casts players as CJ Johnson, who becomes embroiled in the state's gang life following the murder of his mother.

Alongside its massive map, what separates *San Andreas* from previous *GTA*s are its in-depth role-playing systems, letting you go to the gym, eat in restaurants, play basketball and pool, mod cars and rob houses at night. *GTA 2*'s respect system returns to govern character relationships with CJ, while you can also take over sections of the city through its Gang Wars system. *San Andreas* was by far the most mechanically ambitious *GTA* had ever been, and in terms of letting you live a specific life, Rockstar arguably hasn't bettered it.

San Andreas took players to three cities rather than one.

THE HISTORY OF

grand theft auto

2008

Grand Theft Auto IV

GTA gets real

After *San Andreas*, Rockstar struggled to find a way forward with *Grand Theft Auto*, with Sam Houser calling San Andreas a "nightmare" to follow up. But with HD-era consoles bringing a huge leap in visual fidelity, Rockstar eventually settled on realism as the defining characteristic of *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

The setting would once again be Liberty City, yet unlike *GTA III*, it wouldn't be a generic American metropolis vaguely themed after New York. It would be exhaustive pastiche, built from thousands of photos and hours of footage of the city where Rockstar was based. This would be built in a new graphics engine, RAGE, complemented by a revolutionary new physics system that not only gave cars realistic weight and inertia, but also powered how the player walked and ran around the city, and how NPCs staggered and crumpled when shot. Rockstar also overhauled the combat system, previously a weak point, bringing it in line with modern cover-shooters like *Gears of War*.

Most dramatically of all, Rockstar eschewed the cinematic parodies of previous games, instead attempting a more a serious, bespoke story about an eastern-European immigrant struggling to escape his violent past and striving to realise the American Dream. The result was Niko Bellic, the closest *GTA* has come to a truly empathetic anti-hero.

There were trade-offs for Rockstar's fixation on realism. The world was slightly smaller than that of *San Andreas*, and Rockstar also dropped the innovative roleplaying systems. Nonetheless, the unprecedented attention to detail in *GTA IV* not only resulted in huge commercial success and near universal critical acclaim, it also transformed *Grand Theft Auto* from one of the biggest names in gaming into a global cultural phenomenon.

And you think YOUR morning commute is hell.

THE HISTORY OF

grand theft auto

2009

GTA IV: The Lost and Damned

Guns of Anarchy

Rockstar followed *GTA IV* with the series' first expansion in a decade. Yet unlike the *GTA: London* add-ons, which switched up the base game's location and historical period, *The Lost and Damned* was set in the same Liberty City as *GTA IV*, but introduced a new story and playable character – Johnny Klebitz, vice president of The Lost motorcycle club.

The Lost and Damned introduced several new features to the experience, such as mid-mission checkpoints, new minigames like arm wrestling and air hockey, NPC bikers who could accompany Johnny on missions, and a Gang Wars system partly inspired by *San Andreas*. The real draw, though was its fantastic, Sons of Anarchy-inspired story, which saw Johnny juggling conflicts with other motorcycle gangs, political tensions in his own club, and the attention of the police and the New York mafia.

The mission to bomb the Rockefeller Christmas Tree was an unusual segue.

2009

GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony

With friends like these...

Six months after *The Lost and Damned*, Rockstar released a second expansion for *GTA IV*. Swapping the player's perspective once more, *The Ballad of Gay Tony* revolved around Luis Fernando-Lopez, a former drug dealer who becomes the bodyguard and best friend of nightclub owner 'Gay' Tony Prince.

Like *The Lost and Damned*, *The Ballad of Gay Tony* adds numerous new features, swapping the former's Gang Wars system for the similarly structured Drug Wars, and introducing player scores for individual missions. As with that first expansion, however, the main draw was the story, which featured some of the most outrageous *GTA* characters to date, alongside the usual serving of gang conflicts and snowballing chaos. Together, the two expansions arguably represent the series' narrative high-point, taking the lessons learned writing *GTA IV* and creating even sharper stories with a more interesting mix of characters.

2013

Grand Theft Auto V

A living, breathing world

Where *Grand Theft Auto IV* had brought a technical overhaul to the series, *Grand Theft Auto V* sought to expand upon that foundation. Hence, as *IV* had looked to Liberty City for inspiration, *V* looked to San Andreas. Not only did *V* borrow a chunk of *San Andreas*' map to form its setting, it also picked up an idea discarded by Rockstar during that game's development – the ability to switch between three different playable characters.

On the subject of character, *Grand Theft Auto V* returned to the sillier tone and cinema-inspired plot of the early 3D games. Its tale of retired bank robbers returning to their dubious trade drew heavily from classic heist movies, particularly Michael Mann's Heat. The writing is more comic and absurdist, with larger-than-life characters and missions that more frequently throw players into ridiculous situations.

This came at the cost of some narrative depth. The game's three protagonists are harder to like than *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s Niko. Moreover, while the campaign features some fantastic missions, especially its signature heists, many of its smaller missions are intensely railroaded, giving the player little room to express themselves.

Outside of missions, however, *GTA V* offers one of the most remarkable sandboxes ever constructed. Los Santos and its surrounding county is a triumph of environment design, from the golden shores of Vespucci beach to the forested wilderness surrounding Mount Chiliad. Moreover, *GTA V*'s simulation of a modern society in motion is second to none. The way pedestrians react when you bump into them, the overheard phone calls and conversations the way the world so naturally moulds itself around your input. A decade on from release, simply wandering around Los Santos remains a mesmerising experience.

THE HISTORY OF

grand theft auto

2013

Grand Theft Online

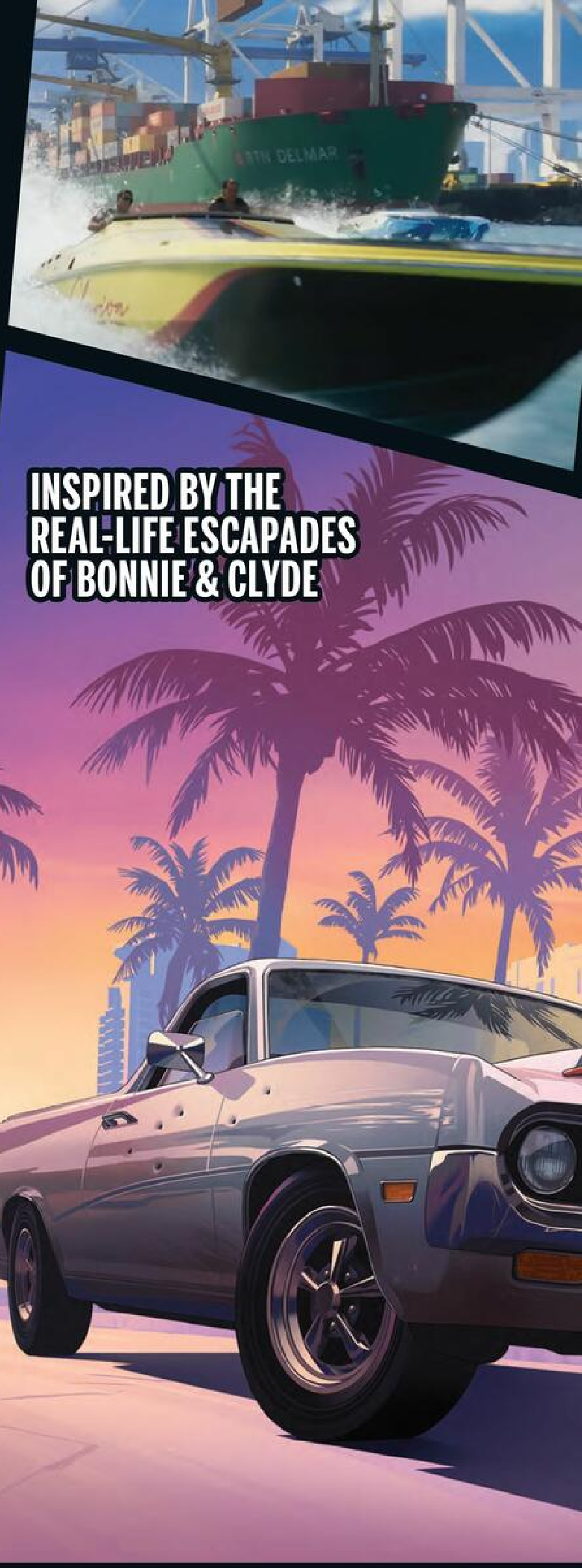
Hey buddy, wanna buy some multiplayer?

Grand Theft Auto's multiplayer history is sporadic to say the least. The original game and *San Andreas* had limited multiplayer modes, but the majority were purely singleplayer. It isn't until *Grand Theft Auto IV* that the series gets proper multiplayer functionality, which allowed up to 32 players to fight, race and cause general chaos across Liberty City.

GTA Online swings the other way, as if Rockstar was trying to make up for those lost multiplayer years all at once. Essentially a separate game that uses *GTA V*'s map, *GTA Online* allowed players to create their own criminal miscreant and attempt to make it big in a world crawling with other players. Straddling the line between standard multiplayer experience and MMO, it let players fight each other or work together in the world itself, while also partaking in more specific activities like racing, deathmatches and more bespoke Contract Missions.

Initially hindered by server issues and a repetitive grind, *GTA Online* found its feet over time. The game adapted easily to emerging live-service models, truly coming into its own with the Heists update in 2015. This introduced five large-scale cooperative missions to the game similar to the singleplayer's signature set pieces. Since then, more Heists have been added, alongside other new features like stunt races, nightclub businesses and, more controversially, the Diamond Casino.

Though flawed, *GTA Online* has been instrumental in maintaining the series' relevance during the long wait for a sequel to *GTA V*. It's also been enormously lucrative for Rockstar, having generated in the region of $8 billion for the company since 2013. Consequently, it's hard to imagine that a follow-up of some sorts isn't in the works alongside the upcoming, singleplayer sequel.



2025

Grand Theft Auto VI

Back in the game

Rockstar's reveal of *Grand Theft Auto VI* got off to a bumpy start. Not only was in-development footage of the game leaked online last year, but the trailer itself spilled onto the internet slightly before the planned reveal. Nonetheless, the upshot is the same. *Grand Theft Auto VI* is coming in 2025, and Rockstar has provided the first details of what players can expect from the sequel.

Grand Theft Auto VI is set in the fictional US State of Leonida – *GTA*'s fictional equivalent of Florida. Players will be returning to *Vice City*, which, as you'd expect from the studio that most recently released *Red Dead Redemption 2*, looks eye-poppingly realistic. The trailer shows a Miami-like beach thronged with a diverse range of NPCs, glittering downtown areas with towering skyscrapers and lavish resort districts lined with expensive cars. But as with *Grand Theft Auto V*, it appears the action won't be limited to Vice City itself. The trailer shows numerous rural locations, such as a highway strung across an archipelago of islands, and an airboat barrelling through Everglade-like marshlands.

The story, meanwhile, centres around two protagonists, Lucia, the series' first female lead in over two decades, and a second, male character whose name is not yet confirmed. In 2022, a report by Bloomberg claimed the game's plot will be inspired by the real-life escapades of Bonnie & Clyde, and the reveal trailer supports that claim. It includes a scene of Lucia and her partner holding up a convenience store, while another scene shows Lucia sat on her partner's lap on a bed, uttering the phrase, "The only way we're gonna get through this is by sticking together."

WAFFLE HOUSE

As present, there's no information on how *VI* will play. We can safely assume that mechanics will involve a mixture of driving, shooting and open-world shenanigans. But specific mechanics and new features are still under wraps. Footage that leaked prior to the game's reveal showed Lucia and her partner holding up a waffle house. But there's no guarantee this location or mechanic will feature in the final game.

That said, the trailer does provide some sense of the sequel's tone. Lucia and her partner seem more grounded as characters than *GTA V*'s Michael and Trevor. Then again, the trailer is also full of social media clips of weird events, like an elderly lady wielding two hammers in the street. But these clips are based on real videos of events that occurred in Florida, suggesting that Rockstar isn't going to have to stretch to fill its game with weird stuff while also telling a story with rounded, believable characters.

Two other points worth noting. This is the first *GTA* in over 20 years to launch without Dan Houser and Leslie Benzies on the team (Sam Houser remains president of Rockstar). It'll be interesting to see how that affects the general direction of the game, although Dan Houser only left Rockstar fairly recently, so his DNA may still be present in the game.

Finally, Rockstar is yet to directly confirm the game is coming to PC. For the moment, only PS5 and Xbox One have been announced as platforms. But this has been the case with *Grand Theft Auto* since 2001, and all the games have found their way to PC eventually. *Grand Theft Auto VI* will be no different. We'll just have to be a little extra patient.

RECKO

A thousand years of wrongs put right in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III**

By Matt Elliott

NING BALL

One of the wonderful, tragic things about Warhammer dwarfs is their terminal decline. A realm that once spanned the Old World has been shattered by the incursion of orcs, goblins and vile ratmen. Most attempts to rebuild their empire end in disaster. It's an endless cycle of failure, loss and shame, and they're extremely grumpy about it.

That's about to change. The Age of Reckoning is upon us. The Immortal Empires mode in *Total War: Warhammer III* offers the most complete and detailed map of the Old World that exists. It stretches far east, to the lands of Grand Cathay, and back west to the New World of Lustria and Naggarond. But the conquest that follows isn't about scale. It's about detail. In this feature, we're going to concern ourselves with the heart of what was once the Karaz Ankor, or Everlasting Realm; a mighty domain that once included multiple mountain ranges and hill settlements. The map in *Warhammer III* is pockmarked with sacred dwarf holds that have fallen into the foetid clutches of greenskins and skaven-kind. For a race that venerates tradition and ancestry, this is the gravest insult, the deepest shame. The Great Book of Grudges, the Dammaz Kron, demands a reckoning. The holds must be reclaimed.

It's not as easy as sweeping through the map and colonising every suitable settlement, though. The inspiration for this article comes from the expanded universe of Warhammer Fantasy. Read enough books about the Dawi – which, apparently, I have – and you'll learn just how much they've lost. The Doom of Dragonback by Gav Thorpe is the primary inspiration for this. It details the fall of a hold called Ekrund. It's not the biggest or most important location in the Old World, by any means, but the detail and colour in the book made me immediately want to fire up the game and fix things. Much like preventing the fall of Constantinople in *Medieval II*, the beauty of *Total War* is that I get to change history. The dwarfs of Games Workshop's Black Library might have failed, but we won't.

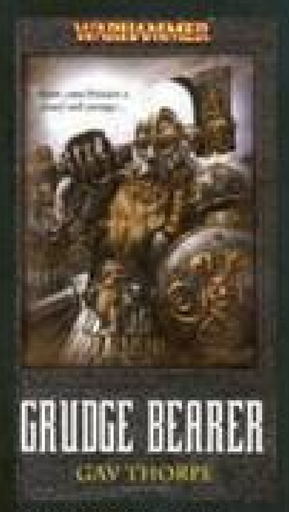
Of course, Ekrund isn't the only location that needs reclaiming. There's Mount Silverspear, Karak Varn, Black Crag, and more. The Warhammer novels are full of places that you wouldn't even know were dwarf holds without their tragic backstories. But *Total War* gives us the power to not only liberate these holds, but give them back their proper titles. And it's with this vengeful thought in mind that we muster the throngs and begin a new age for the Karaz Ankor.

It's natural to assume that the dwarf in charge of the reclamation should be the High King himself, Thorgrim Grudgebearer. He's the custodian of the Dammaz Kron, and the man in charge of righting (and writing) the most heinous crimes in dwarf history. But choosing him feels cheesy. He's an incredibly powerful character who starts out in a strong position. The grim beauty of dwarf lore is that the quest for lost glory is probably doomed. There is, therefore, only one dwarf for the job: Belegar Ironhammer of Clan Angrund, a man so shamed by the loss of his ancestral hold that he's haunted by the literal ghosts of failure. He's the poster boy for Dawi decline; a frothing, furious, clenched jaw of a hero. He will lead us to victory and, if not, at least he can't be any angrier or ashamed than he currently is. There's another reason for picking Clan Angrund, too. In The Doom of Dragonback, the few dwarfs who survive the fall of Ekrund move east and establish new mining colonies in The Vaults: the same region in which Belegar lives in exile. It's possible to imagine that some of the warriors who accompany Ironhammer on his quest are descendants of those who fled Ekrund, or died defending it.

BELOW: Peak Belachad Ironhammer: shrugging off goblin artillery like it's soggy tissue.

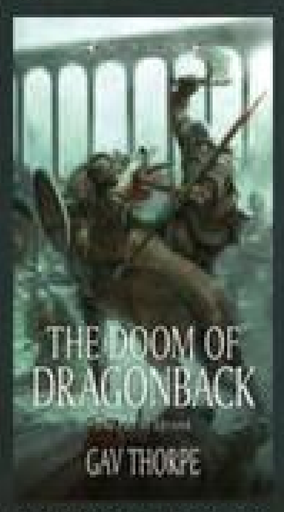
TOME TO KILL

The Black Library bangers that inspired this quest



GRUDGE BEARER BY GAV THORPE

Unique among Warhammer Fantasy stories in that it features a teenage (in dwarf years) female protagonist, this is basically a disaster movie in a Dawi hold. Everything goes wrong and it'll make you sad, in a good way.



THE DOOM OF DRAGONBACK BY GAV THORPE

An epic tale that basically sums up why there's no dwarf word for 'forgiveness'. Like the Dammaz Kron in-game, it's a collection of wrongs that must be set right, and what that actually means for the dwarfs involved.

SKARSNIK BY GUY HALEY

If you fancy seeing the everlasting war between greenskins and dwarfs told from another perspective, this is for you. Although if anything, it'll make you even more afraid of the brutal cunning (or cunning brutality) of Skarsnik.

HONOURKEEPER BY NICK KYME

Read this if you want a reason to start a war with a faction other than greenskins or skaven, or if you've ever wondered why dwarfs are so suspicious of those capricious, capering and pointy-eared elves.

ABOVE: Turn around, lads! There's a feral chav dragon about to feast on you.

KARAK EIGHT PEAKS

Sadly, Belegar has a problem. He is a king in exile; the rightful ruler of Karak Eight Peaks, a hold once second only to the dwarf capital, Karaz-a-Karak, in terms of wealth and prestige, that now lies in the clutches of the enemy. Building any kind of army or momentum with Belegar is almost impossible until you reclaim the most famous lost dwarf hold of them all. Until then, you suffer massive maintenance costs for your armies, so before I can even contemplate heading to Ekrund or Black Crag, I have to recapture a huge, heavily-fortified, fully garrisoned city. Worse still, I'm in a race to get there against a cunning and brutal enemy: Skarsnik. As detailed in Guy Haley's eponymous novel, once Skarsnik takes root in Eight Peaks, it's incredibly difficult to get rid of him. He's like mould in a student flat. I need to build an army that can survive the trip east from The Vaults to Karak Eight Peaks, and do so quickly. Once that's done, Belegar's forces will range north to

CROSSBOWS WILL BE FINE FOR THINNING OUT MY LIGHTLY ARMOURED GREENSKIN ENEMIES

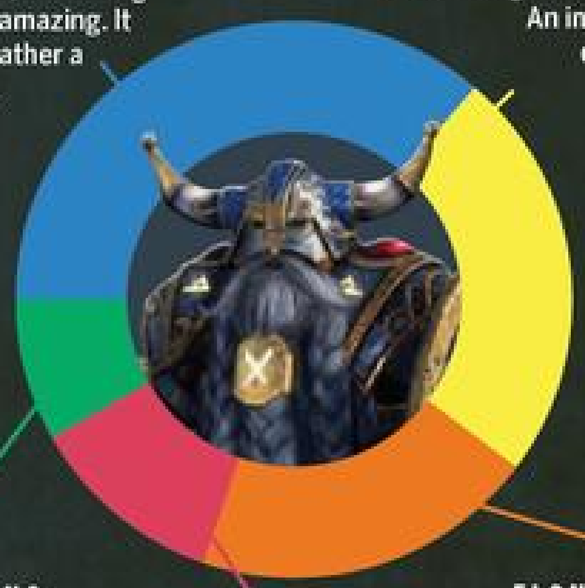
liberate the lost holds of Black Water, and back west to Ekrund, the inspiration for this feature. The likelihood is that all of these locations will be held by different factions, but this is no time for caution. We'll fight a war on multiple fronts if necessary.

It's a difficult start. Like going on holiday with children or elderly parents, there's always some last minute rigmarole that prevents you from setting off. But instead of misplaced comfort blankets or beta blockers, the problem here is skaven incursions and the unwanted and inexplicable attention of undead pirates. Eventually I'm able to give the vampires enough of a pasting that they sue for peace, but the ratmen represent a persistent problem. I don't have the time or resources to crush them, so instead I focus on buildings that will improve my defences. It means my starting area will be less productive, but it's hardly an everlasting realm if I abandon the settlements I began with.

I don't have time to upgrade my settlements and unlock top-tier units, so I focus on preserving the decent ones Belegar starts with: hammerers, a tier-four unit that specialises in damage output, and rangers, a missile unit that can snipe and outflank enemies. Aside from that, I pack my army with dwarf warriors and quarrelers. Even the most basic dwarf units are doughty, immovable objects, and crossbows will be fine for thinning out my lightly armoured greenskin enemies. It's not an overpowered army, by any means. Too many fights on the way there and I won't have the muscle to retake Eight Peaks, and the whole exercise will be doomed. One reassuring thought, however, is that at least my northern borders will be safe. As I mentioned earlier, High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer starts with a crushing grip on key dwarf locations. There's a chance he might even make it to Ekrund and the Black Mountains before me, and I'll have to use diplomacy to reclaim them. Either way, at least they'll be back under Dawi control. It's also useful knowing that the greenskins and skaven have

REVENGE INCARNATE

How Belegar spent his time restoring the Karaz Ankor



37% MURDERING GROBI SCUM
The good things about goblins is that there are lots of them, and killing them feels amazing. It does take rather a lot of time, though.

24% PEST CONTROL
Skaven are everywhere in the Old World. Including, apparently, beneath the holds Belegar already owns. An inconvenient distraction.

8% GRUMBLING
The beer was too flat. The enemies too soft. The elves too nearby.

12% RETAKING
Actually retaking the dwarf holds we set out to liberate.

19% FLOUNDERING
Faffing around trying to save our floundering High King.

another faction to bother, which might help me move east.

Belegar's forces finally reach Karak Eight Peaks, expecting to see Skarsnik sitting upon the cold throne. But... he's not. In his place is a faction called the Crooked Moon Mutinous Gits, who apparently took over the hold while Skarsnik was out hunting. This is good news in many respects, since they're a weaker faction. But it also means that Skarsnik is still out there, plotting. My forces are slightly diminished, but still strong enough to besiege Karak Eight Peaks. It eventually falls. The first legendary hold is back in dwarf hands. Belegar's shame is lessened. But his work is only beginning.

BELOW: Losing the Dwarf capital is so humiliating that I'm ashamed to even caption this.

WILD RUSH

The wild rush to Eight Peaks was disorientating, so I've missed the state of the map. It's... odd. There are elves living next door to me, like we're in a cheerful high-fantasy sitcom. Lizardmen have ventured north, yet seem quite content to ignore me. But strangest of all is the fate of Karaz-a-Karak. Somehow, the most powerful dwarf faction of all seems to have been displaced by a band of minor greenskins. Instead of providing an immovable bulwark behind which I can reclaim the lost glories of the Dawi, they've become a broken, fragmented mess. Allying with them is like trying to hang a duffel coat on a sugar sculpture. Part of me wants to ignore them and carry on to Ekrund or Black Water. But then I think about what brought me here. So many of the holds fall because dwarfs from different lands fail to work together. And, more than that, this is about honour and history. What's the point of reclaiming an empire if we don't have a king? It's like building the world's best kennel for a dog you accidentally buried while laying the foundations.

And so, in a third act plot twist any Black Library author would be proud of, I decide to save High King Thorgrim and ensure he retakes his seat in Karaz-a-Karak (he actually takes his seat with him wherever he goes, because he's like that, but I'm sure you understand the analogy). It's a precarious task. His faction is so depleted I have to keep gifting them settlements so they don't go extinct, like an anxious zookeeper encouraging pandas to shag. Worse still, he keeps losing the settlements I give him to raiding orc forces. Eventually, I nurture him back to a state of health where I can turn around for two minutes without him accidentally tripping over a snotling and shattering his kneecaps, but he's in no state to besiege the greatest dwarf city of them all. Instead, I have to do it for him, leading a powerful force of grizzled Dawi the gates of Karaz-a-karak before ejecting the capering goblin filth that's taken up residence there. It's an easy fight, but it does make me feel better immediately gifting a vital settlement to a faction that has nothing to offer in return. It's so un-dwarf-like that it does feel like the finale to a Warhammer novel; a dwarf king hellbent on reclaiming land, who nevertheless gives up the greatest city in the Karaz Ankor because it's the right and proper thing to do.

After that, reclaiming the lost holds proves easy. My forces colonise the neighbouring province of Black Water, and, in doing so, reclaim the fabled Bugmans Brewery for dwarfkind. The Bloody Hands faction, who control Ekrund, have concentrated so much effort on destroying Thorgrim that I can easily swoop in and colonise the smaller settlements that surround the province capital. Then, just when it feels like it can't get any more literary, Gotrek and Felix, themselves the subject of 17 Black Library novels, turn up. It's a sign. We march on Ekrund, retake it, and chase the greenskin filth from the land. It's tempting fate, but this looks like a renewed dwarf empire. Ekrund is reclaimed. The Black Water is under our control. And even Mount Silverspear has been wrested from the grasping hands of the chaos dwarfs. No Warhammer novel about dwarfs would ever end this well. Let's enjoy it before Skarsnik arrives... ■

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

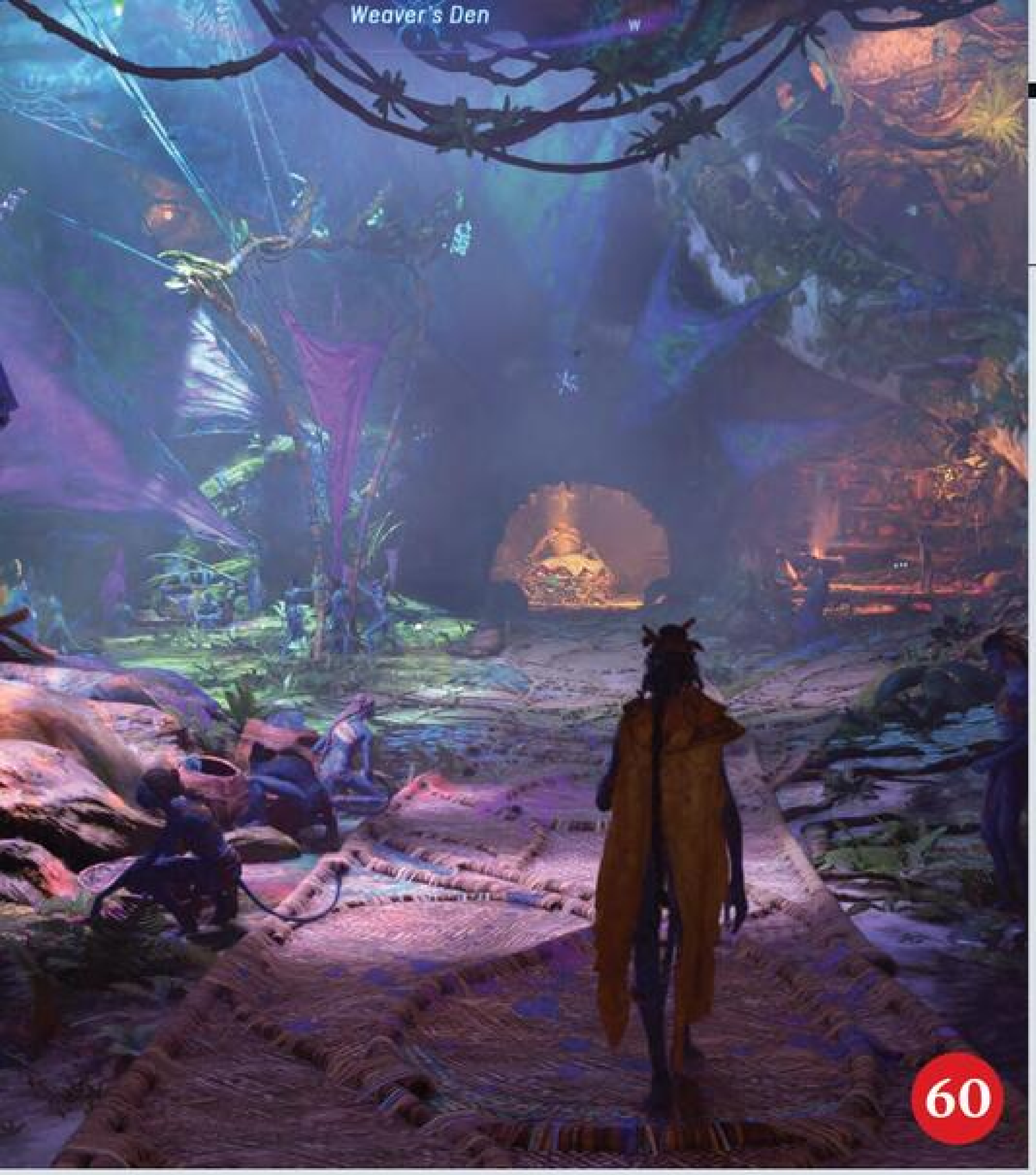
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Crysis point

The cinematic FPS adventure game *Crysis*, released back in November 2007, quickly become known as a technical showcase for the next-generation of PC gaming graphics. To run *Crysis* at anywhere near its maximum settings on release required a monster of a PC gaming rig, loaded with state-of-the-art components. The result was that most PC gamers didn't experience *Crysis* as its developer, Crytek, intended.

Fast forward to today, and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* seems to be actively pursuing its own *Crysis* point. If you can run the game on its maximum 'Unobtanium' settings, then you're in for a spectacular, next-gen visual treat. However, like our review this issue reveals, right now many PC gamers won't get that experience or, even a stable one.



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This month's mad reviewers...

NOAH SMITH

Specialist in
Painting himself blue

Currently playing
Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

This month
Learned the Na'vi language. Used it to say naughty words.

RICK LANE

Specialist in
Merry men

Currently playing
Gangs of Sherwood

This month
Wore green tights and disappeared into the woods after dark. Wouldn't say why.

JODY MACGREGOR

Specialist in
Hunting heretics

Currently playing
Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader

This month
Had his presence announced by a flying robot skull in a wig.

DANIELLA LUCAS

Specialist in
Scrooge McDuck quotes

Currently playing
Disney Dreamlight Valley

This month
Released a rap album with Scrooge McDuck called 'Money Bin Mad'.

MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Totalitarianism

Currently playing
Tropico 5

This month
Demanded everyone in the PCPP Towers bar salute while hailing him as 'El Presidente'.

THE FRONTIER IS CLOSED

A Pandora's box of technical issues in AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

By Noah Smith

A*vatar: Frontiers of Pandora* transcends its progenitor series *Far Cry* with awe-inspiring presentation, a captivating world and tense combat, but at present it's buried under a mountain of technical trouble and it could take months to unearth a genuinely great game with patches and driver support.

When it's working, navigating Pandora is a total joy: sprinting at mach five across the forest floor and parkouring across the serpentine tree roots that connect dense jungle brush to rock formations suspended in zero gravity. Avatar's psychedelic *Ecco the Dolphin*'s colour palette meets Starship Troopers' industrial sci-fi look is translated beautifully from film to game, and the skyboxes especially are some of the best I've ever seen. The sheer density and variety of reactive flora and fauna is stunning. The whole thing is jaw-dropping.

The audio is also a standout, with a score that dynamically shifts from ambient strings that accent the natural sounds of Pandora to pulsating drums and droning synths during combat. It's a soundscape that I expect will see a lot of success outside the game as probably one of the most diverse and interesting ASMR sound palettes I've ever heard.

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

For me, the gorgeous presentation has been undercut by the usual suite of technical issues that accompany big multi-platform releases – frequent hitching, fps drops (AMD Adrenaline says I'm getting 90, but it looks a feels a lot more like 45), and blurry FSR3 scaling, which Ubisoft originally attributed to a lack of a day one driver update. That driver update has come, though, and the issues haven't subsided.

My time with the game has been consistently impeded by a frustratingly common suite of game-breaking bugs and performance issues: we're talking full-on system crashes, consistently poor performance, and bizarre progress-erasing interface bugs (namely a perpetually greyed-out 'continue' button that only works again after the game is deleted and subsequently reinstalled). For these reasons, getting sufficiently immersed in *Frontiers of Pandora* is extremely difficult.

Avatar's psychedelic sci-fi look is translated beautifully

It's been my experience that post-launch, these issues have gotten worse, not better, even when using some of the flagship AMD hardware advertised in partnership with *Frontiers of Pandora*. Bad FSR3 implementation seems to be the culprit behind most crashes, but even with that disabled, walking into a Na'vi hometree or stepping into an area with dense foliage (which scholars will note is 75% of the game) would almost always prompt the same result. For this review, I wasn't even able to spend any time above Pandora's jungles on the back of an Ikran, because getting to one required me to climb a tree that 20 times out of 20 crashed me to the desktop on different hardware, driver, and settings configurations.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Far Cry*-like set in the world of James Cameron's Avatar

EXPECT TO PAY
$75

DEVELOPER
Massive Entertainment, Ubisoft Shanghai, Dusseldorf

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 7700x, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6600

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
ubisoft.com/en-au/game/avatar/frontiers-of-pandora

HUNTING AND GATHERING

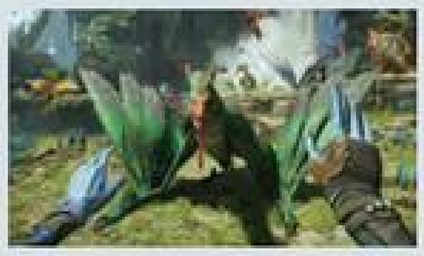
My wings (and adulthood!) denied to me, I spent most of my time in *Frontiers of Pandora* stalking across the lush jungle floor. Resource gathering by means of foraging and hunting is the primary means by which you source special ammunition and crafting materials for new gear, but *Frontiers of Pandora* puts an environmentally conscious twist on what would otherwise be a purely extractive (colonial, even) approach to harvesting. Killing a deer quickly or gently removing the fruit from a tree will yield higher quality resources, which can be donated to the communal baskets at the various Na'vi clan hometrees in exchange for rare materials and unique rewards. I did roll my eyes when I took down a Sturmbeast (imagine a six-legged dinosaur buffalo) for the first time and my Na'vi said a short prayer to Eywa, thanking her for sharing her gifts – I get what it's going for, but attaching these traditional Indigenous harvesting practices to the borderline ecocidal *Far Cry* hunting system comes off as ridiculous, especially when you say a solemn prayer after punching a dog in the back of the head eight times.

I can't overstate just how much the minimalist user interface and emphasis on exploration is a

YOU'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Pandora's most dangerous occupants

HAMMERHEAD
Titanic, aggressively territorial grazers. Hammerheads will pulverise you if given the chance.



IKRAN
Tameable pterodactyl-dragon hybrids, a bond with one marks a Na'vi as an adult.

AMP SUITS
Hastily converted loaders used by the RDA to patrol Pandora. No life-support systems.

RDA AIR FORCE
Military surplus from the Third World War exported en masse to Pandora. Vulnerable to archery.

LEFT: *Frontier*'s jungle floor is the most dense forest I've seen in a game

BELOW: The artisan Aranhe Clan rewards you with dyes and cosmetic materials.

RIGHT: RDA facilities are dangerous killzones that require thoughtful, considered stealth to overthrow.

FAR RIGHT: The Human resistance feels really out of place – don't expect to see it appear in the movies.

Aranahe Community Contributions - Part 1
0/3 Contribute to the Aranahe community
> Find a community basket to see what the clan needs
Ikran Landing

welcome departure from Ubisoft's traditional approach to open world design. Objective markers only show up when you engage Na'vi senses (detective vision), which has made my time on Pandora a mostly peaceful one, occasionally punctuated by intense combat with enemy patrols. There's still a bevy of side missions and objectives and collectibles and all the usual open world junk here, but not having a constant reminder of just how much bullshit there is to still do makes *Frontiers of Pandora* feel a lot more chill.

Your arsenal is a blend of Na'vi and human weaponry

Your arsenal is a blend of Na'vi and human weaponry: longbows and bigger, heavier longbows, lacrosse sticks that lob grenades and poison traps, as well as assault rifles and shotguns. It's a melting pot of weapons that each fill an enjoyable niche in *Frontiers of Pandora*'s combat sandbox. Archery in general just feels fantastic, impaling some company footsoldier with an arrow that feels like it was shot out of a railgun did not get old.

It's a bit trite to say, "It makes you feel like a Na'vi!", but *Frontiers of Pandora* consistently emphasises just how different Na'vi physiology is, and the abilities it adds to the Ubisoft *Far Cry* formula are great, the best being a charge and double jump.

THOUGHTLESS BEAUTY

Remember the mech suits from the first movie? Those are most of what you'll be fighting across Pandora, though they'll occasionally be supported by light infantry and air support. They're total pushovers if you can isolate one, but having to deal with even two at once was enough to get me to start thinking about combat strategically.

There was a great moment early on where I had to face down five mech suits that had me switching between weapons a la *Doom Eternal* – lobbing grenades to knock them off balance, cracking their dumb truck windscreens with arrows, and then spraying down the pilot with a quick burst from my gun.

While fun to pincushion with arrows, I can't help but feel that the invading Resources Development Administration, who in the films is a modern day mining company run by a neoconservative Judge Holden, have had all their edges sanded off. Their unflinching brutality is only ever alluded to with Na'vi occasionally mentioning they've gotten word of "village massacres", a shallow parallel to the Mai Lai massacre that's at odds with the setting. In *Frontiers of Pandora*, the RDA is so bereft of its characteristic imperialist brain rot that it's easy to forget that it got kicked off Pandora after a failed shock and awe military operation designed to "blast a hole in the Na'vi racial memory". It's satisfying to see these guys get murdered by tie-dye coloured dragons precisely because they are gang members with MBAs. Without the confidence to draw meaningful parallels between the RDA and both modern and historical imperialism, some of sci-fi's best villains have been reduced to security guards.

It's not just the weak antagonists: *Frontiers of Pandora*'s is shackled to a jarring, awkwardly written and tone-deaf narrative. At the first human resistance base, your Na'vi character will be subjected to endless inane babbling – there's constant gawking and cracks about the differences between human and Na'vi physiology, and without the option to push back, it comes off as a thoughtless backing track of nonstop microaggressions that will likely be uncomfortably familiar to any Indigenous person. Worst of all is a nuclear-weapon level title drop which identifies the Na'vi ambassador program that your character is raised in as a "Residential School". That label totally misapplied, and *Frontiers of Pandora* doesn't capture the extreme range of abuse present at these 'schools' with its depiction. It's a tasteless and irresponsible comparison, made all the more jarring in a series that succeeds in honest portrayals of imperialism and colonialism.

The issue of cultural appropriation and impropriety in the context of Avatar is needly – for what's it worth, I'm Indigenous and have been ride or die for these movies since the first one came out in 2009. Ultimately, *Frontiers of Pandora*'s eye roll inducing dialogue is way out of step with both films, and the need to undercut everything with a smarmy joke consistently fails to portray some of the most interesting aspects of both human and Na'vi culture.

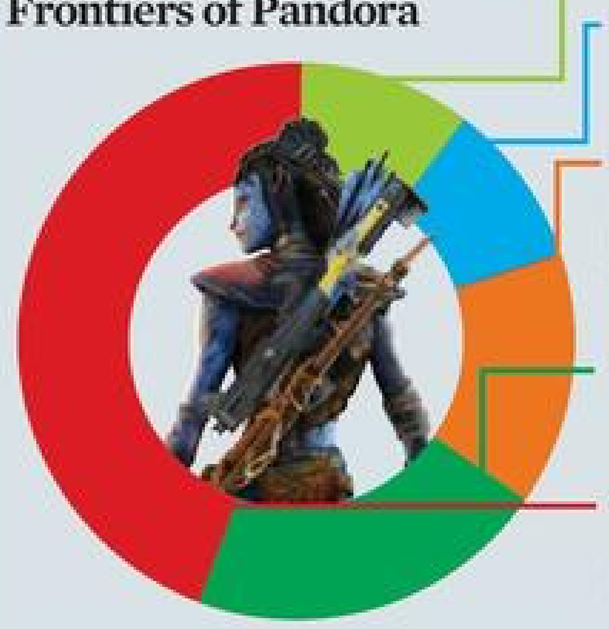
A point from the first film that I've always appreciated is how the Na'vi see industrial society as a type of mass insanity, an idea that *Frontiers of Pandora* has left unexplored. The game hasn't added anything to Cameron's world, and I've even noticed a few things that conflict with the film: remember the big 'Dragon' gunship? There's a few of those in *Frontiers of Pandora* despite that being a one-off military vehicle.

Though the narrative that Ubisoft has crafted to stand alongside Cameron's is at best baffling and at worst offensive, the immersive environment feels like a step forward. That world, impressive as it is, is undercut by inexcusable performance and atrocious stability.

Your experience may differ: one person at PC PowerPlay who's using a GeForce RTX 2080 Super says that the game has run fine for him. I'm not the only one experiencing frequent crashes, though: other players have reported the same issue on different hardware configs. I hope that these issues will be rectified, but for now, *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* just isn't worth the headaches. ■

HUNTING AND GATHERING

***Breakdown of time spent in* Frontiers of Pandora**



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora's stunning presentation and world design are failed by atrocious tech issues.

50

STAID MARIAN

GANGS OF SHERWOOD's four-player fighting is all too frivolous and all too fleeting

By Rick Lane

Like its babbling crew of outlaws, *Gangs of Sherwood* tries to compensate for its fundamental shortcomings with a brash persona and propulsive energy. It's a fast-paced, four-player shooter-slash-brawler with a vividly drawn alt-fantasy world, a knockabout comedy tone, and lively combat. Unfortunately, these colourful distractions fade away all too quickly, revealing Robin Hood rummaging through your purse as he tries to lift $58 out of it.

Oddly, what I like most about *Gangs of Sherwood* is the thing I was least convinced by before playing – the setting. *Gangs of Sherwood* takes the familiar Robin Hood tale and plonks it in an alternate, sci-fi history. Generally I'm not a fan of gaming's fixation with alternative takes on Robin Hood. But *Gangs of Sherwood* quickly won me over with its vivid combination of steampunk and medievalism. For what is clearly a budget title, *Gangs of Sherwood* chews through some impressive scenery, with dramatic backdrops and some monumental combat arenas.

Unfortunately, the environmental artistry is spoiled by some of the worst UI design I've ever seen. It's a horrifying mess of clashing colours and incongruent text fonts that constantly obscures the action. It makes *Gangs of Sherwood* look like one of those dodgy fake game adverts that appear before a YouTube video.

This isn't the only area where *Gangs of Sherwood* undermines quality foundations. The game adopts a distinctly British comedic tone, shooting somewhere between *Fable* and the games of Planet Moon Studios. It made me laugh several times early on. I'm particularly fond of the puppet-show briefings that take place before missions. These are charmingly goofy and more elaborate than they need to be. Sadly, the script provides diminishing comic returns. Since the characters never stop talking, the humour runs out of ideas after a couple of hours, and the jokes become increasingly recycled.

The humour runs out of ideas after a couple of hours

Likewise, combat shows initial potential. Whichever character you play as, battles are about combining light and heavy attack combos to deal massive damage to enemies. For example, Robin's baseline moveset involves using close-range melee attacks to generate magical 'star' arrows that hover in the air around the battlefield. By hitting an enemy with a charged shot from your bow, you can unleash these purple arrows at enemies all at once. The game quickly bolsters these basic abilities with several other abilities, like a 'drill' arrow that deals damage over time, and an explosive arrow that throws enemies into the air. It's a sprightly and satisfying system, letting you pull off some tasty manoeuvres after a few missions.

So what's the problem? First, *Gangs of Sherwood* is far too easy. Your characters don't just level up across the game. There's a separate, in-mission levelling system that gradually bolsters your health as you progress through the map. This means missions are always hardest at the start, whereas dying requires

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Third-person cooperative battler with middling comedy and combat

EXPECT TO PAY
$58

DEVELOPER
Appeal Studios

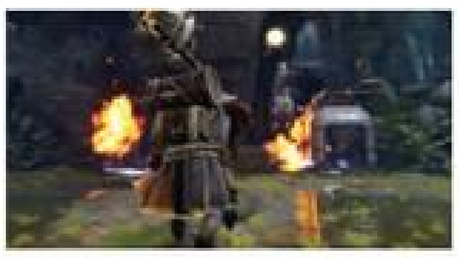
PUBLISHER
Nacon

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
gangsofsherwood.com

ABOVE: I didn't expect the depiction of Nottingham to be THIS realistic.



TOP: Robin's Star Arrow ability is a little confusing at first, but can be supremely powerful.

ABOVE: While playable solo, the game is definitely better with other people.

active effort beyond the halfway point. Moreover, combat is so formatted around arena-based encounters that it becomes deeply repetitive, and while characters initially have pleasing skill progression, later abilities tend to be less useful or less interesting.

OCCASIONAL SIDEQUESTS

The deeper you reach into *Gangs of Sherwood*, the more perfunctory its systems feel. The game has loot, but it's very basic, either just gold to buy skills and the odd outfit, or relics that afford minor stat or effect boosts. The main missions are enjoyable enough to fly through, but little of the story has any lasting impact. And at just five hours long, the game wraps up so fast that you won't have unlocked all your character's abilities by the time the credits roll.

Even at the cut-down price of $29, *Gangs of Sherwood*'s flawed, frivolous co-operative battling makes it is a tough sell in a year so stacked with fantastic games. It isn't entirely devoid of merit. At half that price, you'd just about get your money's worth provided you can wrangle a full complement of players. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Shows initial promise, but both the script and the systems run out of steam before the end of its brief running time.

50

The game's visual design is pretty creative.

THE GANG'S ALL HERE

These guys are in the game

ROBIN OF LOCKSLEY
Can stack star arrows for bonus hits.

MAID MARIAN
Specialises in bladed weapons. Light attacks can throw daggers.

FRIAR TUCK
Specialises in a massive club. Doubles as a healer. Gives amazing hugs.

LITTLE JOHN
Specialises in punching. Can go berserk. Drinks cortados.

MARKET DOWN

WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER gets the tone right, but combat's a drag

By Jody Macgregor

We've just defeated a cult, foiled a plot, saved a world. A bureaucrat says the triumphant parade has already been organised. We'll get to ride a battle tank, and halfway it'll stop and a small crowd will mob us. It's all stage-managed. The mob has been carefully vetted, as the bureaucrat explains, "Members of the military. Young people, attractive and physically fit. A few healthy children."

In moments like this, *Rogue Trader* nails the dystopian satire of Warhammer 40,000. When I want people to know how important I am, I have a robot skull in a barrister's wig that flies around announcing my presence and title. One of the entertainments at a coronation is just 'shooting prisoners'.

SUBTLETY'S FOR COWARDS

Rogue Traders are an ideal part of Warhammer 40,000 to make a videogame about. A merchant/privateer/explorer in charge of a ship the size of a city with thousands of crew I'll never meet, and who live and die based on my decisions, a Rogue Trader is allowed to talk to aliens and skirt the edge of heresy in ways the average citizen isn't. You're free to navigate a deeply messed-up society without immediately being burned at the stake. Instead, consequences manifest in a three-track morality system where the three values increase independently. You earn Iconoclast points for compassion, for pushing back against the Imperium's disregard for individuality. Dabbling in Chaos in return for power earns Heretical points, and embodying Imperial values earns Dogmatic points.

They'd probably insist on burning the babies just to be sure

This is perfect for Owlcat. In the *Pathfinder* games, which had D&D's alignment system, Owlcat tended to interpret Lawful alignments in a "we should kill goblin babies because they'll grow up evil" way, which made playing a paladin a jarring experience. In *Rogue Trader*, that's the kind of thing a Dogmatic person would say, only they'd probably insist on burning the babies just to be sure.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Mass Effect but isometric, dystopian, turn-based and not that much like *Mass Effect*

EXPECT TO PAY
$70

DEVELOPER
Owlcat

PUBLISHER
Owlcat

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
roguetrader.owlcat.games

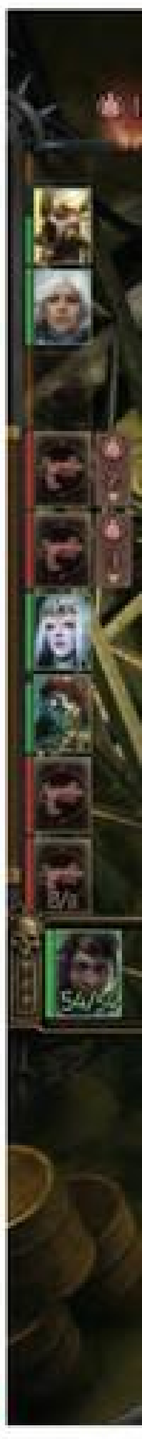
The *Pathfinder* games also had a management tier that put you in charge of a kingdom or a crusade, making world-shaping decisions. I always get invested in these systems in spite of their clunkiness, and *Rogue Trader* has the best yet. Building a network of colony worlds means working up a tree of projects for each of them, like researching Ergonomics for the overcrowded mining planet, which means that the convicts who work there will, between shifts, be tranquillised and put in pods. Rewards for these projects include boosts to my Profit Factor and the occasional item, but aren't so game-changing you'll feel obliged to micromanage. It's OK to engage with them superficially if you don't want the hundred-hour playtime to balloon even further.

There's also space combat, which treats void cruisers like sailing ships that fire broadsides at each other while turning in arcs on a flat 2D plane, as in the tabletop game Battlefleet Gothic. It's great, and assigning companions to the stations of my ship gives me access to a manageable number of special abilities on cooldown, like making a short-range warp jump to hop ahead five spaces or choosing one of my ship's shields to reinforce each turn.

It does get unwieldy once the number of enemies goes up, with a fight against six light cruisers who each fart out a cloud of bombers at regular intervals really dragging on. It doesn't help that space battles don't end immediately when the cruisers are taken out, and instead I have to mop up every last fighter and torpedo, or wait for them to detonate. But for the most part spaceship combat is a nice change of pace.

STRANGER THINGS

Exploration is the other layer of the management cake, framed as remapping the Koronus Expanse after warp storms alter jump routes through the system. Since



A TYPICAL CHAOS CULTIST LAIR

Dedicated to Slaanesh, god of excess

1 STATUARY Too sensual for the 41st millennium.

2 DEBAUCHEES Having an unsanctioned amount of fun.

3 HUMAN HARP Music? God-Emperor save us, someone might dance.

4 HANDCUFFS No sex please, we're Imperial.

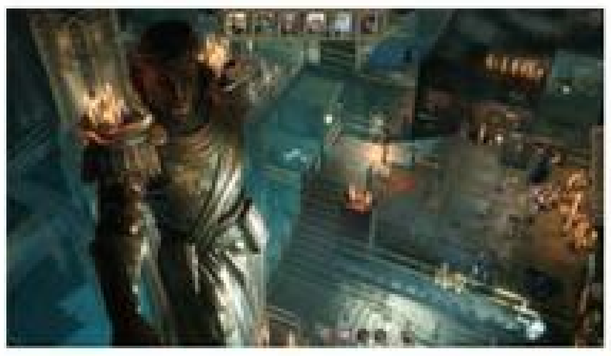
FAR LEFT: The wall art's all classic 40K illustrations.

BELOW: Nothing heretical going on here, officer.

Looks great, but combat is often not that exciting.

FAR RIGHT: Show me your army list, this doesn't seem legit.

BELOW: Priests who worship electricity aren't big on health and safety.



intersystem travel in 40K means stepping into a universe where howling daemons devour souls and strong currents of emotion manifest as demigods, that's an interesting time. Once I recruit a Navigator I can spend the occasional point, earned by making discoveries, to upgrade the safety of a route, but most of them remain risky and result in spooky narrative events.

These pick-a-path interludes have a dream-like vibe, with consequences including random body-swaps and unexplained phenomena. A few too many events just result in a fight with daemons and zombified or rebellious crew, but when they're creepy paragraphs that end with several hundred crew lost or another section of the ship being sealed off forever and us just continuing on because we must, they remind me of *Sunless Sea* in the best way.

Rogue Trader is loosely based on a tabletop RPG that Fantasy Flight Games published, but where Owlcat's *Pathfinder* games tried to recreate their tabletop inspiration with relative faith, here the dev has almost completely rewritten the rules. Spaceship combat is better, but the squad-level combat where you and five companions have turn-based tactical battles with rebels, daemons and aliens not so much.

Everyone has action points that let them activate abilities, only one of which per turn can be an attack (except if you've got an ability that lets you break that rule, of which there are several). Many are buffs and debuffs or designed to be used in combination with other abilities. Operatives get an ability that lets them analyse targets to pile 'exploits' on them, then other abilities that either strip those exploits away to reduce armour and gain a bonus to hit, or give allies the power to strip exploits when they attack and gain bonus damage.

A handful of abilities like this can be flavourful and make for interesting decisions, but in *Rogue Trader* everyone has a laundry list of them providing percentile bonuses. I've specialised my tech-priest into a grand strategist who designates three zones of the battlefield at the start of every fight, each giving different bonuses to allies and penalties to allies who stand in them. On subsequent turns he can shift those zones around or change what they do, in addition to managing all the stuff with exploits because he's an operative, as well as activating various tech-priest abilities with his cybernetics. It's a lot.

It's just that there's a lot of combat, and most of it's boring

HUFF AND BUFF

In the *Pathfinder* games, prebuffing was vital for the harder fights. You had to faff about before big battles casting spells to make sure you had the right resistances and stat boosts. There's none of that in *Rogue Trader*, and at first I thought that was a blessing. It turns out the prebuffing has been replaced by 'mid-buffing', stacking abilities throughout the course of each fight to insure you've got enough momentum to activate your heroic abilities and boosting everyone's damage to deal with increasingly spongy enemies.

There are things about the combat I like. There's artful slow-mo that adds emphasis to the Sister of Battle's bursts of bolt-pistol fire or the Psyker's lightning arcing from target to target. And using psychic powers results in veil degradation, which adds whispering voices, shadow tentacles and other visual effects as well as random Perils of the Warp like a blastback of psychic damage or straight-up summoning a daemon. It's just that there's a lot of combat, and most of it's boring. There's never one interesting tactical battle when there could be three samey ones to grind down your resources.

The proliferation of abilities and passive bonuses to those abilities makes character progression a chore. Everyone levels up constantly, and making decisions for the six party members plus the three left behind who need to rotate in for their personal quests is absolute tedium.

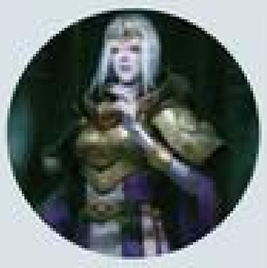
The other thing that sapped my goodwill is bugs. I had to restart after a quest-blocking bug 18 hours in, and had characters insist I help them with problems I already solved or offer their services after being recruited. One enemy ran back to the beginning of the map on the first turn and hid there, meaning after dealing with his friends I had to trek back in turn-based mode to finish the fight. Allies sometimes don't act on their turns, and distant enemies sometimes take a full minute to decide what they're doing. The camera doesn't always move where it's supposed to when dialogue pops up during battles, meaning I have to read it in the log after. The log reverts to Russian when describing Perils of the Warp, and explains why I have to reroll successes by saying "%Reason%". Two of my combat abilities stopped working for a while, and the tech-priest's utility mechadendrites, which are supposed to give him a +10 bonus to Demolition and Tech-Use, instead give him a +1,020 bonus.

If you played Owlcat's previous RPGs at launch, you'll be familiar with the feeling you're playing the worst version of the game. Months down the road there will be expansions and a fleet of bug fixes. Given that *Kingmaker* had a new combat system patched in, it's not impossible that *Rogue Trader* could get a significant overhaul. Until then, keep the parade on hold. ■

MOTLEY CREW

Some of the early companions you'll meet

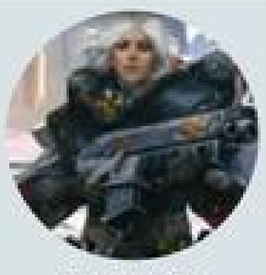
YRLIET
One of the alien Aeldari who regards you as little better than an animal.



CASSIA
A three-eyed mutant Navigator who pilots your ship through the warp.

HEINRIX
An Interrogator who works for the Inquisition and keeps you in line.

PASQUAL
The tech-priest who keeps your ship running with prayer and sacred oil.



ARGENTA
A nun with a gun, no patience for heretics, and a mysterious past.

ABELARD
Your Seneschal, and the obligatory boring first companion man.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader gets 40K's atmosphere right, but it's buggy and the rules are a mess.

59

ABOVE: Secret paths lead to creatures known as moon ancestors.

FAR RIGHT: Green switches are the most basic means of making things move.

You often find yourself being transported on strange vehicles.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

COCOON is a beautiful, tactile, ingenious puzzle adventure

By Jon Bailes

After a short stint wandering the orange canyons of *Cocoon*'s opening area, you come across a curved groove in the ground. At one edge sits a large metallic ball, which you grab and yank until it reluctantly leaves its rectangular base, yet remains connected by a chewing gum string. Once the gum's elasticity approaches its limit, the base starts to move too, gliding across the mouth as if you're opening a zip.

As a puzzle adventure, the joy of *Cocoon* is in figuring out how to overcome obstacles and progress, but it's also in the execution. Taking hold of the ball in this instance is an obvious course of action given that the beetle-winged humanoid you guide around can only manipulate the world via a single action button. You drag the zipper along the groove and that activates a platform. Job done. But this is a far more pleasing exercise than pulling a lever. The tinfoil tint of the ball, the pliability of the gum, the pink flesh that ripples as the zipper makes its journey. It's all so very tactile.

In this way, *Cocoon* makes incredible meals of its puzzles within vibrant worlds that could have adorned prog rock album covers. When you're pressing switches and activating bridges here, you're not simply pressing switches and activating bridges. Even the platform that responds to the zipper is actually an enormous flat robot bug that rears up and embeds its front claws in the canyon wall. In these and many other moments, *Cocoon* is properly, delightfully surreal.

SMALL WORLD

Once you get further into the game, the puzzles become more substantial as well. Mainly that's down to *Cocoon*'s star feature, which introduces itself when you reach a kind of round rubber platform, and watch as your beetle person flies up and out of the world itself. Now you're in a grey environment, and the world you were in a moment ago exists here only as a large orange marble, which functions as a kind of power cell in your new surroundings. You hoik it onto your back then deposit it on small plinths to make bony bridges appear, or summon smooth plasticky platforms. Certain plinths enable you to return to the original planet. With some warping back and forth you might find ways to shift an obstacle in one world with a mechanism in the other.

Certain plinths enable you to return to the original planet

Soon you acquire two orbs, three, four, each also a world of its own. In some sequences, you remain inside a single biome for a while, forging forward without worrying about its position in the greater scheme of things. Some other sequences focus on one of your orb's unique powers, like the way orange solidifies otherwise invisible walkways within its aura, creating new paths, but only when you're carrying it.

Ultimately, though, frequent world hopping becomes a necessity and *Cocoon* pushes the concept to marvellous conclusions. What if you need to carry the orange orb, for example, but that takes you to a place where you need the green orb? Well, how about stashing green inside the orange world first, then retrieving it once you reach your destination? *Cocoon* builds on the ramifications of such concepts iteratively, and won't let you wander far off track. Its puzzles are clever but not complicated, endlessly strange yet logical. At times, it asks you to think a little wider, backtracking slightly to find what you need, but it never overwhelms or allows you to get lost.

Nor does *Cocoon* ever relax its audiovisual design, which provides the perfect environment for puzzles, making no sense then perfect sense as soon as you toy with it. Its architecture blends natural vistas into cellular structures, always with a seasoning of the ordinary that you can grasp in an instant. Pillars jut from the ground spaced narrowly enough for you to pass but not an orb, ensuring you can enter but a trolley can't. Fields of lollipop plants wobble like mushrooms as you push through. A transport vessel resembles a giant jam sandwich biscuit. *Cocoon* is a game about the texture of puzzles, and rarely have they felt this good. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A puzzle adventure game directed by Jeppe Carlsen, former lead designer at Playdead

EXPECT TO PAY
$26

DEVELOPER
Geometric Interactive

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

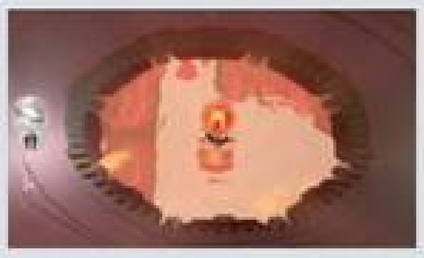
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cocoongame.com

WONDER BALL

Each colour contains its own world



ORANGE
Carrying the desert aura, you'll use orange to cross invisible bridges that light up.

GREEN
Inside is a swamp land where you'll get your feet wet. Carry green to ascend and descend.

PURPLE
Its world feels like being trapped inside a giant body. The purple orb can travel through growths.

WHITE
This orb containing an industrialised world enables you to shoot lasers at various target.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Cocoon is a puzzle adventure of rare ingenuity that thrives on its tactility as much as its design.

90

FLIP SERVICE

Live the property fantasy, debt-free, in HOUSE FLIPPER 2

By Tom Sykes

You can see why the original *House Flipper* was such a hit. Its cosy fantasy of home ownership and fulfilling work was a soothing balm after a miserable day at the office, and that fantasy is only strengthened in this sequel. The basics remain the same: jobs appear in your email, from cleaning tasks to full-on home renovation, and you can use the profits to buy properties from the auction house, ready to be glowed up and flipped for a profit.

Accept a job and you'll appear outside the house with your bag of tools. Bin bags to collect the rubbish, one measly cloth to wipe down the surfaces, a roller for painting, and so on. I haven't played the previous game, but the interface for managing these tools seems neater and easier to grasp here. It's no longer mimicking an in-game tablet, so menu icons are free to be a little more gamey: larger and more colourful, easier to identify at a glance.

Straddling simulation and more casual play – which is really the whole ethos behind *House Flipper* – these actions mimic real life, to an extent. When building a brick wall, you watch a lovely animation play, but all you're doing is holding the mouse button down, as your character plucks bricks and mortar from thin air. Mostly, I'm happy with this middle ground – smashing walls down with the sledgehammer feels particularly satisfying – but I'd feel more connected to the work if I also had to clean up the rubble.

Generally, the acts of cleaning and tidying, building and buying are slick and easy to pick up, but the game does struggle with its 3D space sometimes. Occasionally I had to balance on furniture and agonisingly adjust the mouse cursor to position ornaments on high shelves. There's no real way to delete things either, so you either have to sell or replace errant items. Having to find and buy the original flooring in the online shop, when all you've done is put one floorboard in the wrong place, is extremely annoying. But, overall, the graft is rewarding. It's not so detailed a renovation sim that it feels exhausting or overwhelming, nor so casual that you barely need to be there. Renovating feels cosy, an element expanded for *House Flipper 2*.

One of the most satisfying things I've done in a game all year

TOWN AND OUT

There's now a wholesome story campaign tying all your freelance jobs together, as you tackle projects across the town of Pinnacove. You'll gradually expand your operation, from Crayfish Coast to Suburban Pinnacove and ultimately Coralroot Forest, taking on bigger jobs and earning more money in the process. You'll want to earn three stars (the best possible score) on jobs, and only partly because it earns more money and it feels more satisfying to properly finish the job. You'll also want to please your clients, who are a more overt presence this time around, thanks to the phone calls that pop up as you work.

As I restored a bedroom for a grandmother who was eagerly awaiting her grandson's arrival, I was touched to open a box and discover his train set. Delicately assembling it on his desk – because I wanted to, not as a marked objective – is one of the most satisfying things I've done in a game all year.

On the flip side, there's the new Sandbox mode featuring no clients at all. Design a house from scratch without having to worry about money, and with a more comprehensive range of tools that let you speedily set down walls and even sculpt the surrounding environment. But building houses is only part of the Sandbox experience – the integrated modding tools let you share them with other players. Right now, there are only a handful online, but I downloaded a couple to test them out and was quickly exploring player-made houses.

The most interesting thing about Sandbox houses is that you can turn them into jobs. That is, run-down properties in need of renovation. Slather them in mud, smash up the floorboards and sprinkle junk all over the worktops, then upload them for other players to fix. It's sure to be the defining feature of this quietly confident sequel, which doesn't make many big changes – it just opens up its homes to the community. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A casual building sim about restoring houses and selling them for profit

EXPECT TO PAY
$58

DEVELOPER
Frozen District, Empyrean

PUBLISHER
Frozen District, PlayWay SA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
houseflipper2.com

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Restoring and building houses isn't enough

1 MIND PALACE From the menu, you can tackle Assembly missions in your workshop. As it's not part of your house, it seems to exist outside of time and space.

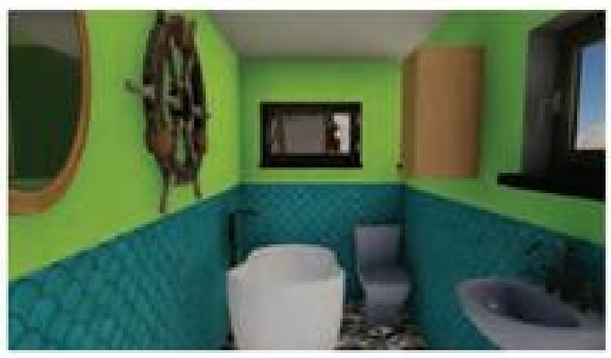
2 TIME TO KILL Take on challenges to build items, like this clock. The process is in-depth, with mechanics you won't find in the main game.

3 TICK TOCK Mind the time, however, as your score will reduce if you take too long. Cleared Assembly missions reward you with store discounts for related items.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

House Flipper 2 is more of a touch-up than a full-on renovation, but Sandbox mode is exciting.

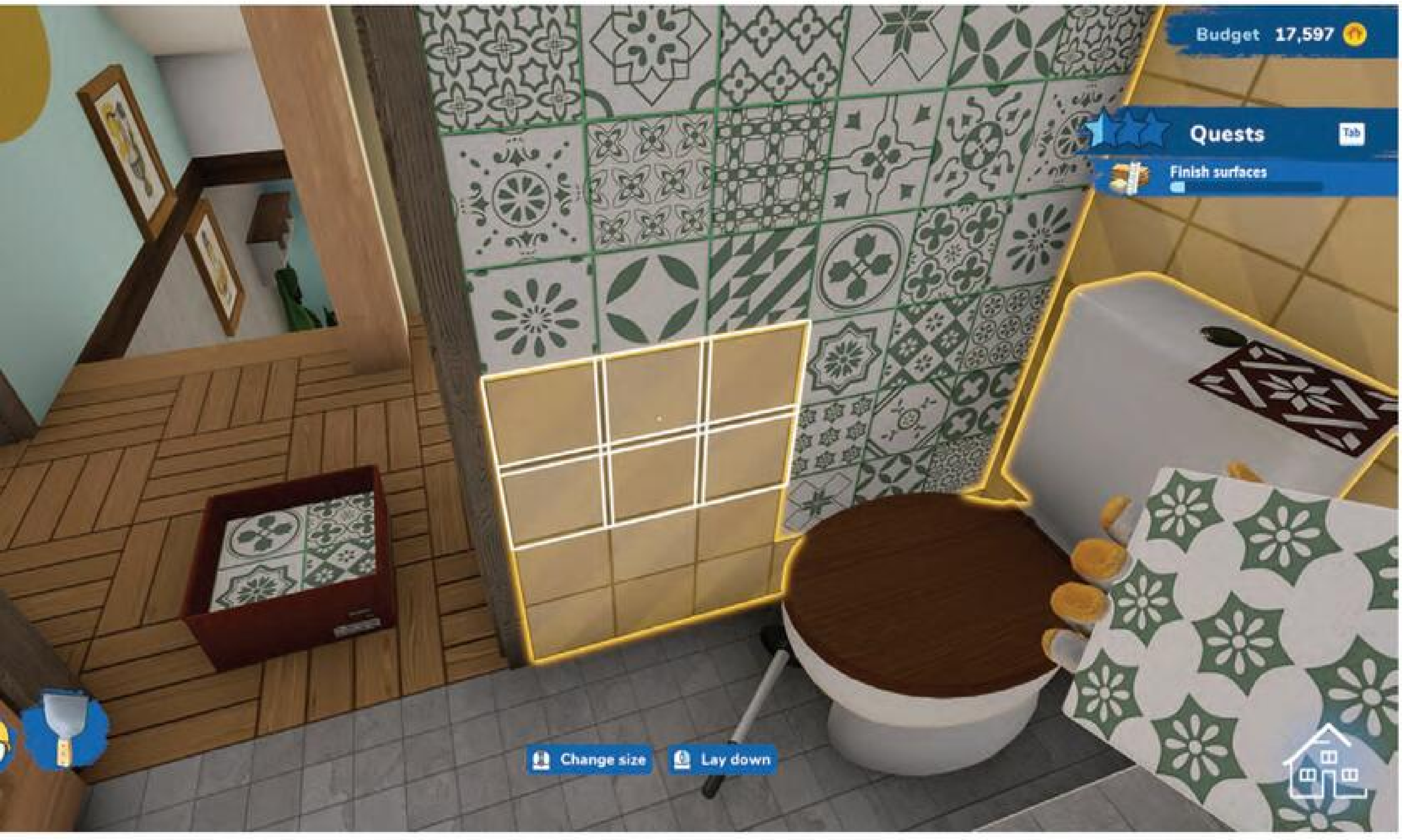
81



FAR LEFT: You have a gun that turns unwanted items into profit.

LEFT: Hit Q to highlight objects that need to be dealt with.

BELOW: No need to worry about patterns. Just point and tile.



DISNEY CROSSING

DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY scratches that Animal Crossing itch, but at a price

By Daniella Lucas

Over the pandemic everyone seemed to find comfort in the gentle virtual maintenance of their *Animal Crossing* islands. Pootling about, talking to villagers, and designing things just so. Nothing else has come close to replicating that weird state of zen that comes with pulling weeds and paying debts. Until now.

Disney Dreamlight Valley is very much like *Animal Crossing* in that you start on a barebones island, hunt down some tools, help out a money-hungry animal (this time it's Scrooge McDuck rather than Tom Nook) and gradually shape things to your liking. The valley starts off in a right old state, having been overcome by The Forgetting, a curse leading to boarded-up buildings and an infestation of giant thorns. Slowly, you start to clean up, and things go from derelict chic to homely hamlet. As you invite more villagers to join you and unlock more options to beautify your town.

Theming and customisation are where the game really shines

Dreamlight uses a simple gathering and crafting system for the vast majority of its gameplay. You mine rocks with your pickaxe to get stone, forage for colourful flowers, farm and fish to make food, and pick up wood from trees to turn into gorgeous furniture pieces at your crafting table. There are lots of basic pieces to mess about with, from benches to cupboards, but you'll also find items inspired by specific Disney properties, such as the tea set from Beauty and The Beast, or Mickey Mouse ears to wear. This theming and customisation are where the game really shines – you can really make your own little Disney paradise. There are seasonal events too where you can earn even more stuff, including exclusive character outfits, ice rinks and even a Ferris wheel.

Unlike *Animal Crossing*, which sees you roaming around your island freely to set your own goals, *Dreamlight Valley* has a more fixed agenda for you. A lot of areas and crafting opportunities are locked off until you hit an appropriate point in the main story and gather enough resources to do so. Though a little confining, it gives the game a welcome sense of direction. There's still a lot of freedom in what order you tackle things in, too, so those roadblocks never really feel like they get in the way, instead just giving you a focus as you work towards unlocking your favourite characters.

Things do get a bit grindy after a while though. During the first dozen hours, things unlock at a brisk pace, and new options are regularly opened up to you; but after that, things noticeably slow down, and suddenly you need to spend a lot more time gathering to get the materials you need to progress.

No matter how many signs of The Forgetting you might clear away, you'll never be able to be rid of the true curse of *Dreamlight Valley*: its currencies. Despite being a game with an upfront cost, it features a free-to-play style microtransaction currency called Moonstones, needed for all the coolest items and even some quests. They can be earned in play, but it's a very slow process, and there's no way you'll be able to keep up with what's available.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Casual life sim

EXPECT TO PAY
Expect to pay: $60 for base game, $104 for base game and DLC

DEVELOPER
Gameloft

PUBLISHER
Gameloft

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-8250U, 8GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 620

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
disneydreamlightvalley.com

SPENDING CHOICES

As an adult, I can happily justify to myself any irresponsible spending choices I make, but when you consider that a big portion of this game's audience will be children keen to play with their favourite Disney heroes, it takes on a sinister tone. The game was originally intended to be free-to-play, and it shows despite now having a significant upfront price tag. Perhaps the developer has taken a few too many lessons from Uncle Scrooge.

Underneath all the muck of pricing problems the Disney magic still shines. Befriending the likes of Mickey, Elsa and Stitch while watching your island transform into a paradise is satisfying. It has filled the *Animal Crossing*-shaped hole in my life, so it's disappointing that I can't in good conscience recommend it for the full price it is now. You're better off waiting for a sale and committing yourself to being choosy about spending those Moonstones. ■

ISLAND STYLE

How long it takes for your island to look good

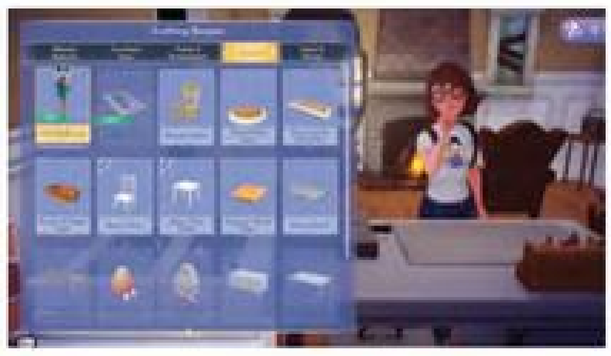
Disney Dreamland
Shabby chic
Thorny wreck
I am a town-planning genius.
Things are clearing up, houses popping up.
Better get those gardening gloves on.
Wait, that train set costs HOW much?!
Leaving it so long it's overgrown again.

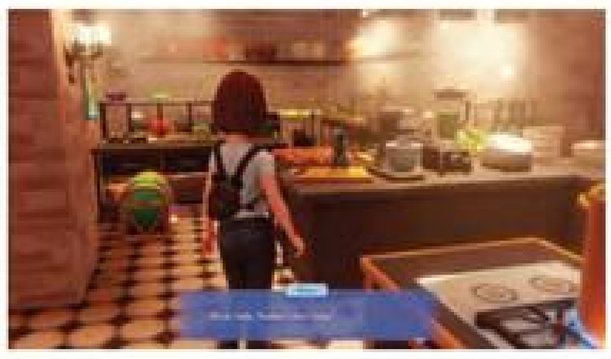
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Steep costs and microtransactions taint *Disney Dreamlight Valley*'s otherwise dreamy life sim.

68

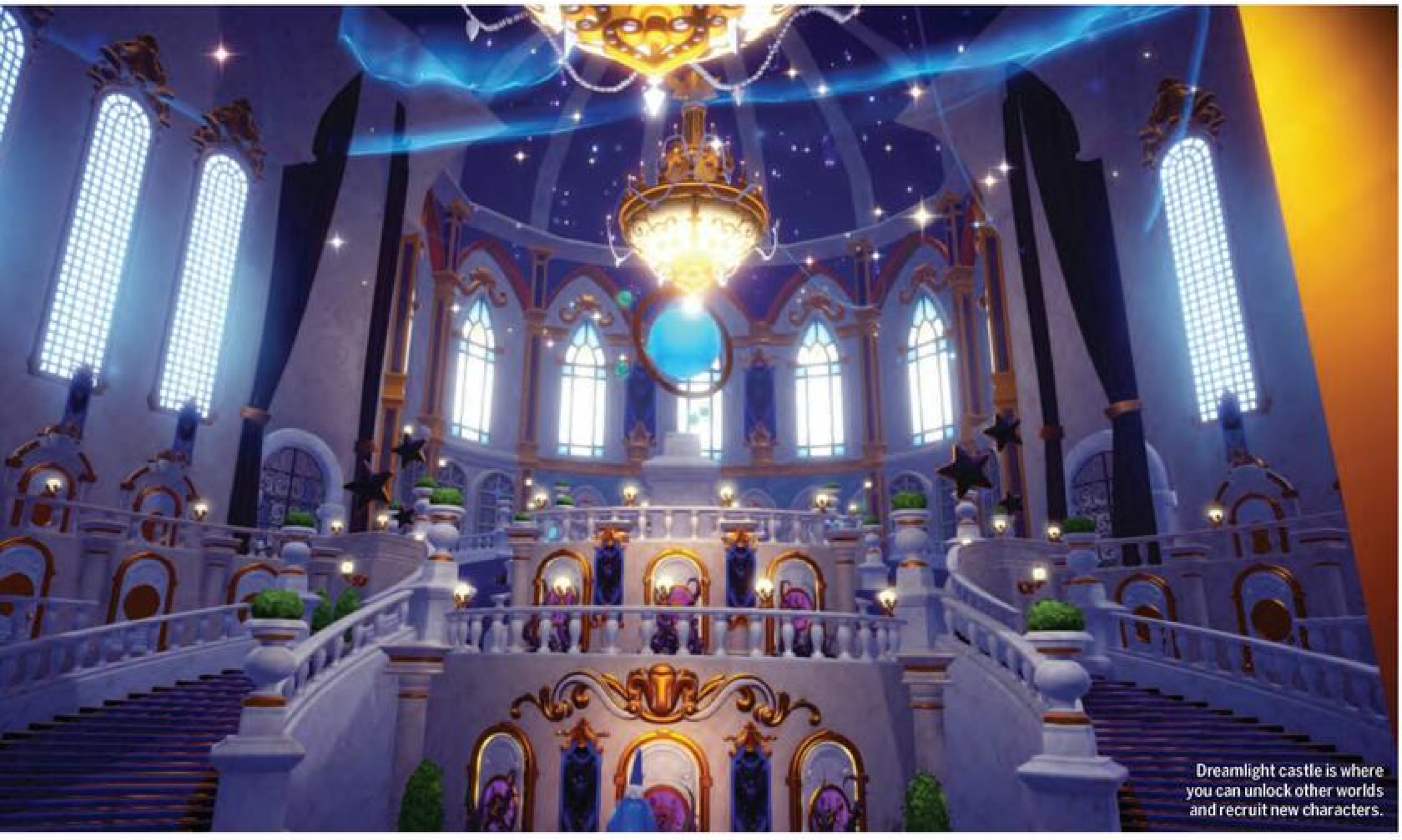
Mickey's homestead is ruined by prickly thorns – a bit like the game itself.





FAR LEFT: You can also do a spot of farming for cooking ingredients.

LEFT: There's loads to craft, but gathering materials takes a lot of time.



Dreamlight castle is where you can unlock other worlds and recruit new characters.

LEAVE IT TO BEAVERS

Building doomed cities and loving it in AGAINST THE STORM

By Len Hafer

The basic idea baked into a city builder is that I'm creating something to last. So when *Against the Storm* presented me with the premise that each of my handmade habitats would be wiped away by a terrible tempest as part of an unavoidable, cataclysmic cycle, I wasn't sure how to feel about it. But it is one of the most clever, engaging, and endearing strategy games I've played in years.

In the world of *Against the Storm*, some kind of horrifying, magical disaster has turned the once-idyllic fantasy countryside into a rain-soaked, ruin-strewn morass in which everything outside of the magically-shielded capital, The Smoldering City, is annihilated by hurricane-force gales every year. As the queen's viceroy, your job is to set out during the brief windows during which the land is traversable to found productive settlements that will take you closer to a set of mysterious seals. By completing these seals, you will permanently lengthen the storm cycle and draw closer to understanding what happened.

Each new settlement site comes with a varied set of possible positive and negative modifiers, which could be anything from a ghostly presence that randomly kills unhoused villagers to a creepy species of tree that also gives you meat, in addition to wood. I'm sure it's fine. While keeping the central hearth fire lit at all costs, you send your intrepid humans, beavers, lizards and other anthropomorphised animals out to chop through the woods and discover new glades while collecting resources to build houses, workshops and decorations.

You're completely out of luck in the baked goods department

While the strong silhouettes and low polygon count of its models, buildings and trees can evoke a bright, fairytale wonderland, the dangers that lurk between the branches are more like the original Brothers Grimm stories. Central to everything are two meters measuring the queen's grace and her impatience. Filling the grace meter first signals that you have won the map, and can set out from this foothold to reach further into the gloom and start another. But maxing out her impatience means the expedition is deemed a failure and recalled, and the time you've spent there won't get you any closer to a seal.

Impatience simply rises over time, but grace can only be earned by completing semi-randomised missions and keeping your villagers happy. Everyone needs food and a house. But each of *Against the Storm*'s races also has specific desires as you move up the hierarchy. This doesn't only create an interesting balancing act, but also adds a bit of personality to each race.

Fulfilling these needs becomes an engaging resource puzzle, especially since the blueprints you receive for workshops and industrial buildings are also semi-randomised. Everyone loves pie and biscuits, but if you simply don't have a mill to make flour this run, you're completely out of luck in the baked goods department.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike city builder about making the best of a doomed world

EXPECT TO PAY
$40

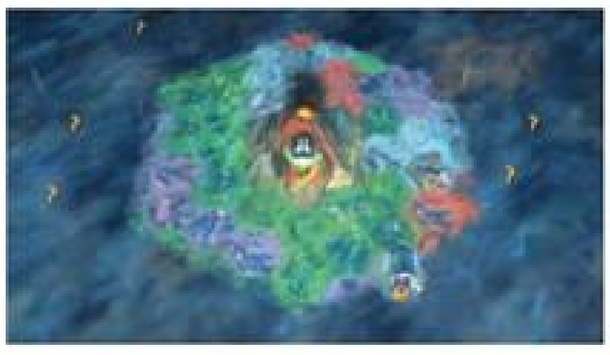
DEVELOPER
Eremite Games

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

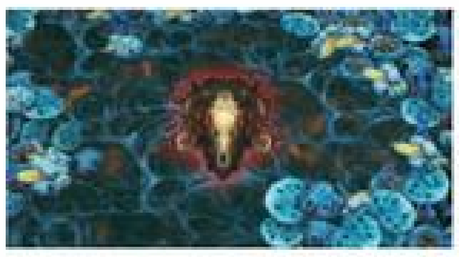
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 3700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
eremitegames.com



ABOVE: A bright fairytale kingdom of wonder, but one that hides lurking danger.



TOP: You desperately need wood to survive, but each tree felled causes forest hostility to increase.

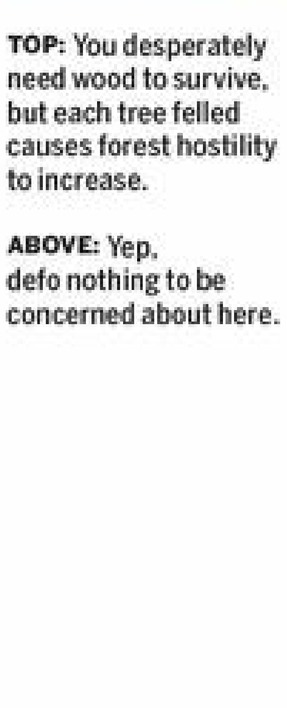
ABOVE: Yep, defo nothing to be concerned about here.

CUTTING DEEPER

At the same time, cutting deeper into the woods increases the hostility of the forest. This looming air of wilderness menace, which freaks everyone out a bit, also goes up passively the longer you spend in one place, which makes it harder to keep everyone safe and satisfied.

It seems like all of these layered considerations would become overwhelming, but in motion they fit together beautifully and prompt you to make meaningful decisions.

Even when I'm not able to land on my feet, I'm rewarded for my time in some small way. The Smoldering City offers a progression tree in which you use resources gained from each expedition to unlock benefits from increases to stats, to new blueprints that can change how you set up an economy. This small amount of incremental progress, assuring me that my next expedition will always be just a bit better equipped than my last, has been a great motivation to keep going even if I hit a bit of a slump. I'm thrilled every time to pull on my boots and get out into it again. This isn't just a great city builder. It's really something special. ■



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Eremite Games' *Against the Storm* is a well-designed, charming, enthralling roguelike city builder.

91

STORMING TO VICTORY

How not to get washed away

1 FORAGING FORTH
Humans, beavers, lizards and more must venture into the wilderness.

2 IMPATIENT GRACE
Complete missions to fill the Queen's grace bar and win the area.

3 BURNING FIRES
A settlement's hearthfire must always be supplied with wood to burn.

WILD ADVENTURES

A HIGHLAND SONG is a mix of genres grafted onto a beautifully presented story

By Alexander Chatziioannou

Experimental, genre-bending approaches to interactive storytelling have always been inkle's stock-in-trade, from the increasingly ambitious multi-part adaptation of Steve Jackson's Sorcery! to the high-seas intrigue of *Overboard!*. And *A Highland Song* is arguably inkle's most multi-faceted work yet.

Moira McKinnon has never been to the sea. She does not get along with her mother who insists she cannot go to school because she wouldn't fit in. Her father has been absent for all her life and her little brother is a bore. So when Uncle Hamish, a kooky lighthouse-keeper who regularly mails her postcards with fanciful stories about heartbroken selkies and furious giantesses, asks her to visit in time for Beltane – the Gaelic May Day – she does what any restless teenage girl would do in her place. She hurriedly packs a knapsack, hurls a farewell insult to her mother, and sets off across a horizon of hillcrests.

A Highland Song makes for a breathtaking first acquaintance. The Scottish scenery is vividly painted in the earthen browns and luscious greens of pine forests, and later, when the peaks get higher and the temperatures lower, with the harsh whites of a sudden blizzard. Gallivanting through these idyllic environments is a joy in itself and, initially at least, the game does a great job of conveying the exhilaration of Moira's newfound freedom via myriad little visual touches: the pep oozing from every frame of her jump animation; the carefree bobbing of her ponytail as she gallops up the gentlest of slopes; the ability to zoom out for a heart-stopping panoramic view (which doubles as the best option for orienting yourself).

A meticulously crafted soundscape of cawing magpies, murmuring brooks, and Moira's own panting breath completes the illusion of this enchanting place – a world where a moderately unusual rock will be named something dramatic like Woe's Wedding or Devil's Tail.

The Scottish scenery is vividly painted in browns and luscious greens

STROLLING, JUMPING,

Of course, aimless wandering and gawking at the local sights are just the simplest modes of engaging with *A Highland Song*. Platforming is the base component in the game's generic DNA, even if Moira's preternatural athleticism eliminated any challenge from the equation as I leapt across chasms, rode a landslide, or sprang from crag to crag with the assuredness of a mountain goat. On the contrary, climbing up a sheer precipice to reach the higher peaks and catch a glimpse of the Atlantic played more like a spatial puzzle.

Yet another mode of traversal involves the much-hyped rhythm runs, predetermined stretches of (mostly) flat land where our heroine picks up the pace and jauntily skips to the tune of rousing Scottish folk songs performed by Talisk and Fourth Moon – respected bands of that scene. I appreciated them as uplifting musical interludes but, otherwise, these sections felt both half-baked as minigames, and somewhat disconnected from the overall experience.

In fact, while both rhythm runs and the game as a whole seemed to constantly propel me forward, I found that learning to slow down was key to my enjoyment. But if adjusting the pace to my liking was within my control other, less malleable, aspects of the game still pointed to that familiar incongruity. While the absence of a map is perfectly reasonable in the context of a game about getting lost, the intricate level design coupled with awkwardly implemented controls comprised an excessive punishment for my wanderlust. Every time I got disoriented, the fear of running in circles around the same cluster of hills or getting stuck at the bottom of a ravine funnelled me hastily back to the nearest landmark. As a result, reaching the lighthouse for Beltane (on the second attempt), prompted two, similarly incompatible reactions: a certain moisture in the eyes at a not-so-shocking, but nevertheless movingly orchestrated, revelation; and a sigh of relief. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A platformer, a rhythm game, a branching story – in other words, another inkle narrative experiment

EXPECT TO PAY
$26

DEVELOPER
inkle Ltd

PUBLISHER
inkle Ltd

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, AMD Radeon 5700 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shorturl.at/jlCU9

MEET MOIRA MCKINNON

An intrepid adventurer in the spotlight

1 BACKGROUND
Moira doesn't get on with her mother, while her father has been sadly absent all her life.

2 MISSION
Moira is on a quest to visit her Uncle Hamish, who has invited her to visit his lighthouse.

3 EQUIPMENT
On her mission Moira relies on her trusty knapsack, headtorch and sturdy hiking boots.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A Highland Song is a mismatched mix of genres grafted onto a moving, beautifully presented story.

71

Exploration is a key part of the game.
VIEWPOINT
PATH BETWEEN THE TREES
Mark the spot where you think the map is pointing to.

LEFT: Yeah, Lynx Africa will have that effect.

BELOW: The game's landscapes are consistently gorgeous.

BULLETS TRAIN

Survival RTS **LAST TRAIN HOME** delves into historical tale-telling

By Jonathan Bolding

In *Last Train Home*, a military management game and tactical RTS, you're in charge of the Czechoslovak Legion as the Russian civil war breaks out. Unable to return home by going west, you make a desperate plan: capture an armoured train and traverse Siberia. Your management of the journey is both on the train, assigning jobs and doling out supplies, and on the battlefield, controlling units of ten soldiers in pausable, tactical RTS battles.

Last Train Home is not so much concerned with historicity as with giving you a glimpse into the desperate mood of a time and place. The Czech legionaries don't want to fight on either side of the Russian Civil War. They really just want to go home, but nobody wants a large band of unaligned armed soldiers meandering about – least of all the Red revolutionaries, who quickly become your primary enemies.

It's historical fiction that reduces the events of tens of thousands of people over years down to dozens over months, but it's well-done fiction that conveys a time and place with fidelity in emotion and detail rather than precision of events. It's also richly presented, with music and art that far outstrip what anyone expects from a game at this level of budget.

Conveys a time and place with fidelity in emotion and detail

Much of the historical fervour in *Last Train Home* is underwritten by the narrator: Captain František Langer, a historical figure whose presence feels authentically Czech. The real-life Langer was a doctor, poet and playwright who fought with the Legion across Siberia. It gives the writers leeway to ensure his lines are not just fitting, but poetic – both his narration, in-scene lines and FMV performance are written (in English) and delivered (in Czech) with soul befitting one of the great literary countries of the 20th century.

I'll illustrate by quoting the in-game Langer, saying that amid the violence of the civil war the sheer human misery simply never ended, "as did the fighting which went on and on without relent, a restless storm upon a human sea".

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Survival management and pausable RTS

EXPECT TO PAY
$60

DEVELOPER
Ashborne Games

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900, 32GB RAM, AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
lasttrainhome.thqnordic.com

BULLETS TRAIN

Managing to survive that storm is your real job. Your soldiers have to become multi-skilled people: riflemen and boiler-stokers and machine gunners and engineers and doctors and scouts and cooks all at once, jobs you have to blend for them in an almost subversively open-ended system of RPG-esque character classes. Managing personnel is a well-designed delight where you need to balance running lean with the idea that your best engineer could get blown up by a stray shell on any given mission. People wear out faster than equipment does.

At the same time you've got to keep them fighting, fed and warm by collecting supplies and managing your train, but every mile walked and battle fought eats into reserves of energy and health that'll have to be recovered lest their bodies and morale collapse. You send them out to defend from enemies, sure, but also on optional side missions – a Red

ABOVE: Soldiers have traits. Antonin is an avaricious, religious, handy, sickly, herbalist.

TOP: Every soldier assigned to a car is represented in-game.

ABOVE: Loading screens are accompanied by excellent paintings.

militia is looting civilian farms, or a convoy is moving supplies.

The weakest bit of *Last Train Home* is the RTS combat. The core design of it is perhaps too micromanagement-intensive, over-reliant on your ability to pause the game and redirect your troops mid-combat. That's forgivable enough, as it's fun to set up ambushes with overlapping fields of fire, pausing to optimally throw a grenade or snipe a machine gunner. The real problem is that you don't really want to shoot: since literally every bullet is desperately scrounged for, getting into a big firefight is the worst.

You end up preferring stealth, but the controls just aren't there for a robust experience playing it as a stealth strategy game. There's no dedicated button to differentiate between melee and ranged attacks. In other years that might have been forgivable, but in a tome that saw a best-in-genre stealth strategy release in *Shadow Gambit*, anything but a very competent stealth strategy experience just feels bad. Still, don't come for the RTS specifically – come to this one for the human history and you won't be disappointed. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Last Train Home is a rich, interesting, and honest experiment in history-as-game: if you're interested, play it.

79

CLEVER CLASS COMBOS

Some classes synergise in obvious ways, others are creative

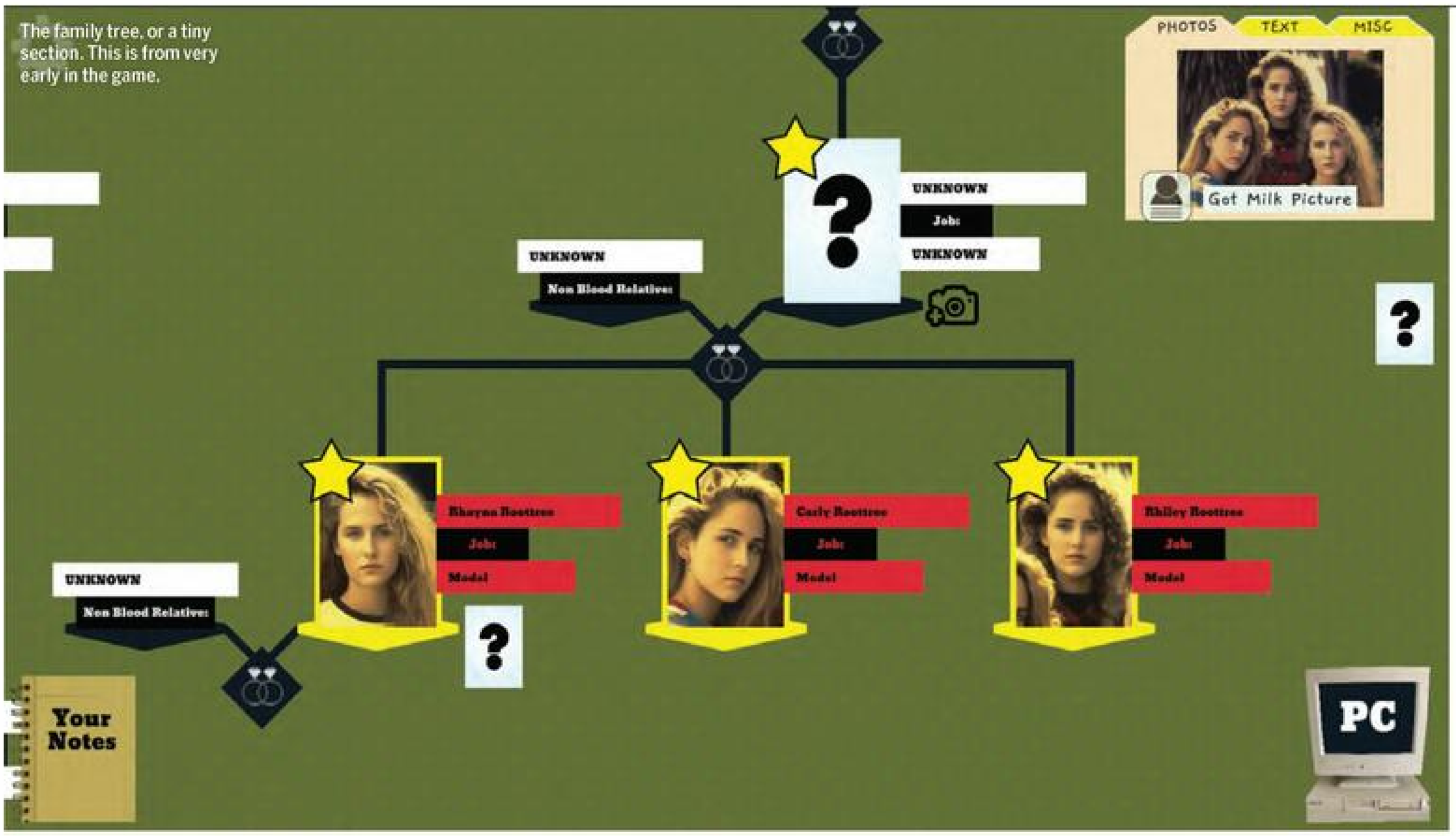
MEDIC + MG
Both medics and machine gunners tend to hold back during stealth segments, so drop expensive abilities like suppressive fire and carry a medical satchel instead of taking an extra soldier. Gun 'em down, patch 'em up.

GRENADIER + SCOUT
You might think that giving the scout very loud grenades is bad, but using their scout ability to peek over a wall and then throw grenades from a stealthy position is the height of tactics. Plus, the grenadier's sprint is handy too.

RIFLEMAN + WORKER
Riflemen use fitness to be ultra-tough, and their willpower passive lets them add it to combat effectiveness. Where does worker come in? Guess what stats they pump doing all the upgrades you need?

DOCTOR + ENGINEER
Both of these benefit from intelligence, but you won't use this engineer to run the train. Instead, this soldier works on the wounded when someone's hurt, and swaps to the armoury car making ammo otherwise.

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes



A FAMILY AFFAIR

Solving a family size mystery in THE ROOTTREES ARE DEAD

The Roottrees are Dead stands on the shoulders of Tim Sheinman's _Family_, a similarly browser-based detective game that had you investigating a music scene and filling in a family tree of linked musicians. In Jeremy Johnston's _Roottrees_, it's a literal family tree, as you've been hired by a mysterious client to decipher the complicated genealogy of the Roottree family, and determine who will inherit the family fortune, after a terrible plane crash.

Sitting down in front of this big flowchart late at night, mug in hand, soft jazz music piping out of the browser tab, it really makes you feel like a detective. Sheinman fans will immediately be at home as they fill in names on the family tree, with the game confirming your right answers and adding more documents to the evidence folder in dribs and drabs. You spend the whole game looking at this family tree – which is so big you'll need scroll and zoom in and out – but also at your (essential) in-game notebook, collected documents and the '90s internet.

If 90% of detective work is sitting in front of a computer, then this is one of the more authentic detective games. You'll type search terms into a (deliberately limited) internet browser, scour a library database for relevant books, and hunt through periodicals for any mention of the Roottree family, who are one of the more notable dynasties in the USA.

Determine who will inherit the family fortune after a terrible plane crash

But you have to figure out the right search terms to locate each cleverly buried clue, as you reveal who beget who, and match faces to names, to advance the story.

It's difficult and time-consuming, but extremely satisfying, with an interface that lessens the drudgery by letting you pin your notebook to one half of the screen. You pepper names across the family tree and are intermittently rewarded with a sudden fade to black: a cue that you've just set down three correct identities. Now, you can get on with solving the rest.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A detective game in which you have to piece together a complex family tree

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Jeremy Johnston

PUBLISHER
Jeremy Johnston

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Roottrees

ROOT POINT

In general, you're left alone to simply get on with your sleuthing, but there are interruptions at specific milestones where the larger plot is moved along a little. It's a riveting story, because the Roottree family is so interesting.

You'll come to know these characters intimately, thanks to their detailed histories but also the fictional photos that are sent to the documents folder. These were made using AI tool Midjourney, so the algorithm only knows which existing artwork they've been cobbled from, but they do help to breath a sense of life into the Roottree family.

If you can forgive the AI artwork, this is an exceptional detective game that will likely consume your existence for several days. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

You've always wanted to stare at a murder board, moving bits of string around, and this is the next best thing.

86

BELOW: The best character by far is your beer-chugging, egg-scoffing boss.

EVERY WITCH WAY

Bubble, bubble, recoil and trouble in TOMMY GUN WITCHES

I'm not sure that I've seen lore used as a punchline before, but it's a beautiful running gag in this urban fantasy where witches are real, and they wield submachine guns. Every titbit about the setting is delivered so matter-of-factly by the noir-style narration that it only highlights its inherent absurdity.

Here we have witches that dress like *Payday* robbers, hiding the green skin of the witch from The Wizard of Oz. And they use Tommy guns because, well, I suspect because it makes for a catchy title. The urban fantasy of The Dresden Files has been mashed down into one half-hour game: a gorgeous, first-person adventure game where you interview suspects and solve simple puzzles across a modern city.

You play as a sentinel, investigating the murder of a man in a hotel room. Which witch did the deed, and why did she leave her sacred mask and Tommy gun behind? The pixel art is sumptuous and suggestive of a whole city, while the dialogue plays it straight and manages to find the humanity in a setting that borders on parody. There are a few puzzles to solve, generally by combining inventory items and discovering where to use them, and for me they found the sweet spot where I was stumped a couple of times, but not long enough for me to resort to a walkthrough.

My only complaint is that conversation feels a bit too streamlined, with no dialogue options to make and no variation in the ending, which resolves the story quite abruptly and with little player input. Still, this is a creative slice of urban fantasy from a developer adventure fans need to watch. ■

80

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Cosmic Void	bit.ly/TommyGunWitches

CRAFT WORK

Driving a submersible in THE TWO RIVERS HYPOTHESIS

***The Two Rivers Hypothesis* is pure aesthetic and atmosphere, with little beneath that – but what aesthetic and atmosphere. It's a game where you pilot a submersible around a dark and flooded facility, exploring tunnels until you discover the ending. But it's not a simple case of pressing WASD and waggling the mouse around.**

No, it's all mouse-driven, with on-screen buttons for moving the craft in the cardinal directions, going up and down and turning, as well as moving the camera. Controlling the craft is an exercise in mild frustration, then, that feels appropriate for the bulky thing you're steering. It should feel cumbersome to explore this place, inciting fear as you blindly turn a corner and drive it down another pitch-black corridor.

As you find your bearings, you're assailed by emails that tell of the facility crew and their ultimate fates. Are you one of them? Are you trying to escape? *Two Rivers* is reluctant to reveal too many details. But the atmosphere as you explore the place – the mounting dread and sense of anticipation – is almost too much to bear, building to a crescendo before it abruptly cuts out.

Assisting in that atmosphere is the flickery VHS filter, which is overused in the indie space but feels relatively fresh here. The effect adds a layer of authenticity that makes the dark, ponderous exploration all the scarier.

Of course, in retrospect I realised that a lot of it was just in my imagination. It wouldn't work a second time, because I know what's here. Still, as an aid to feeling spooked, this is worth a look. ■

72

BELOW: There's a believable sense of weight to the submersible.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Grubwall	bit.ly/RiversHypothesis

GROUP TEST

MAINSTREAM GRAPHICS CARDS

These entry-level and mid-range graphics cards are where the bulk of PC gamers spend their cash, but which are worth the money?

By Jacob Ridley

The most popular graphics card of a generation is rarely the best-performing. Instead it's the one the most people can reasonably afford. The most popular cards, according to Steam's monthly hardware survey, are the RTX 3060, GTX 1650, and GTX 1060. Unsurprising, but what's somewhat more shocking is you have to look pretty far down the list to find any high-end GPUs noted at all.

Nvidia and AMD sell higher volumes across the lower rungs of the GPU market. The so-called 'mainstream' cards. What constitutes a mainstream graphics card is a constantly shifting definition and not easily defined by price alone. In the early days of PC gaming, $800 was kingly money to spend on an add-in card, whereas nowadays that's barely more than budget. Blame inflation, and try not to think about it too much.

There are heaps of options available to the budding PC gamer with a reasonable amount to spend. At every conceivable budget between $450 and $1,000, there are multiple cards competing for your attention. That's why I've grabbed one of each arguably mainstream card today – some more entry-level, some more mid-range – to help you decide on the best value for your rig.

THERE ARE HEAPS OF OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO THE BUDDING PC GAMER

Radeon RX 7800 XT

AMD **$900**

Bang for your buck

1 Look through the latest graphics card releases and you'll find few really stand out for value for money. The RX 7800 XT is one of the good ones, however. It delivers frame rates loosely level with the RX 6800 XT and RTX 3080 for significantly less cash.

The RX 7800 XT is a modern Radeon card in a couple of ways. For starters it's constructed of chiplets, 5nm and 6nm chips, and is one of the first few graphics cards to ever do so. It also is built with AMD's latest RDNA 3 architecture for top shader performance, and comes with 16GB of memory to ensure you're unlikely to run out while gaming. This card truly delivers excellent frame rates versus the RTX 4070 it's ostensibly quite a lot cheaper than. For purely rasterised performance, this is the card to go for, especially now that AMD offers a suite of upscaling and frame generation technologies. AMD's card does fall flat, however, once ray tracing is enabled, and there's no denying Nvidia has the better software tech right now.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Beefy VRAM**
- → **Often matches RTX 4070**
- → **Poor ray tracing performance**

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** RDNA 3 / **TRANSISTORS:** 28.1B / **VRAM:** 16GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY SPEED:** 19.5GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 256-BIT / **TBP:** 263W

GeForce RTX 4070

NVIDIA **$1,000**

Power-savvy pick

2 Delivering a tantalising mix of RTX 3080-grade performance and high efficiency, the RTX 4070 is one of the more well-balanced GPUs of its generation. Even in the face of AMD's cheaper option, the RTX 4070 is an attractive proposition, though that's in some part thanks to the RTX 40-series' secret sauce. The 4nm GPU humming away at the centre of the RTX 4070 maintains solid frame rates for 1440p. You can push it to 4K and expect decent results at times, too, which is surprising from a card that demands 200W. Though it loses points for only having 12GB of GDDR6X memory – we'd like more for the money.

The RTX 4070 does score bonus points for DLSS and frame generation support, courtesy of the Ada Lovelace architecture. These features can help take the edge off rendering a game like *Alan Wake 2*, which is one of the finer examples of what Nvidia's 40-series generation can do. The RTX 4070 also trumps AMD's alternative when it comes to ray tracing.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- → **Excellent efficiency**
- → **RTX 40-series features**
- → **Not quite cheap enough**

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** ADA LOVELACE / **TRANSISTORS:** 35.8B / **VRAM:** 12GB GDDR6X / **MEMORY SPEED:** 21 GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 192-BIT / **TBP:** 200W

4

COMPACT, LOW-POWER, AND GENERALLY QUICKER THAN AN RTX 3060

GROUP TEST

GeForce RTX 4060 Ti

NVIDIA **$750**

Surface level

3 Considering how the RTX 3060 Ti was my favourite graphics card of the RTX 30-series generation, you'd expect me to be similarly pumped for its replacement. Alas, the RTX 4060 Ti isn't quite the diamond in the rough the RTX 3060 Ti once was.

The RTX 4060 Ti actually offers fewer CUDA cores than an RTX 3060 Ti. Moreover, it has fewer RT cores, Tensor cores, and ROPs. It even has half the memory bus width. For those reductions, it is surprisingly the faster card in our benchmarks. But how is that possible? That's achieved through a larger L2 cache, at 32MB to 4MB, and running the GPU nearly 1GHz faster. From framerates alone you can make the case for the RTX 4060 Ti as a mid-range GPU worth sticking inside a gaming PC. It's far from sluggish. My issue is that it doesn't look like much of a generational improvement over the RTX 30-series, and the more you pry into its silicon the more apparent that becomes. At least it's the same price – a small silver lining?

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Faster than a 3060 Ti
- Just don't look at the specs
- 160W TGP

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** ADA LOVELACE / **TRANSISTORS:** 22.9B / **VRAM:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY SPEED:** 18 GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 128-BIT / **TBP:** 160W

GeForce RTX 4060

NVIDIA **$600**

In disguise

4 Aimed squarely at the 1080p gaming crowd, the RTX 4060 is the cheapest way to score an RTX 40-series graphics card on desktop. It's also the cheapest way to score frame generation and DLSS 3.

This card is compact, low-power, and generally quicker than an RTX 3060. At 115W, it's massively more efficient than the 170W card it ostensibly replaces, too. So it's a major upgrade? Not so fast. The RTX 4060 comes with just 8GB of GDDR6 memory, a reduction on the maximum 12GB configuration on the RTX 3060. Also a smaller memory bus, and fewer CUDA cores, RT cores, and Tensor cores. It does partially make up for those deficiencies with a healthy cache and clock boost, but nevertheless feels like less card.

The RTX 4060 benefits from a lower price tag than the RTX 3060 at launch, which helps to partially mitigate the reductions seen across key specs. Though there's no shaking the feeling it looks more like an RTX 4050 in ways rather than an RTX 4060.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

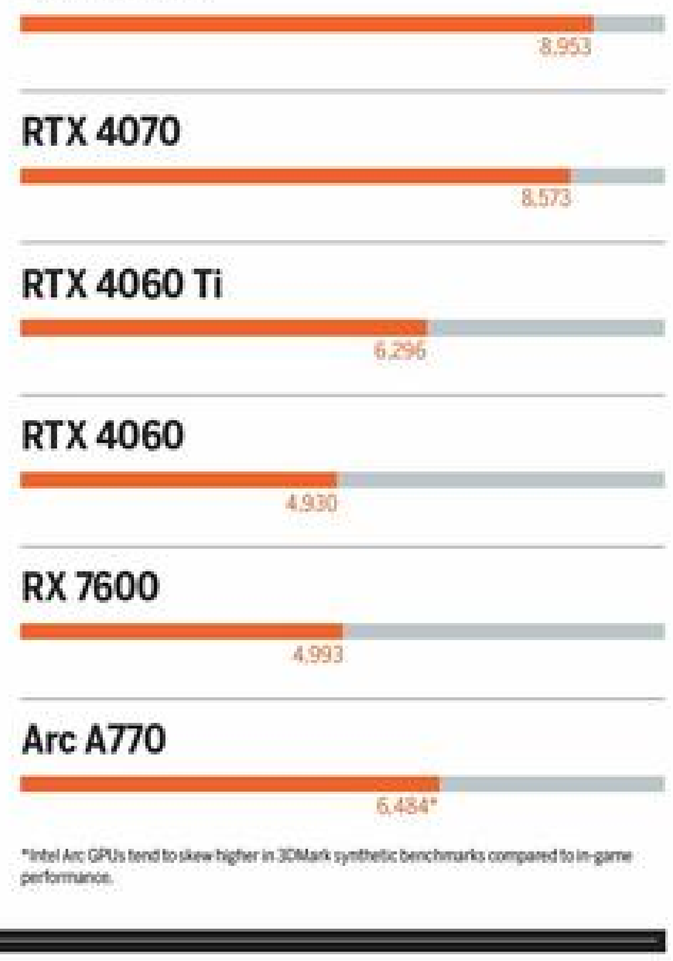
- Faster than a 3060
- Barely over 100W
- Unimpressive silicon

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** ADA LOVELACE / **TRANSISTORS:** 22.9B / **VRAM:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY SPEED:** 17 GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 128-BIT / **TBP:** 115W

THIS INTEL CARD REPRESENTS THE HIGH-END OF THE ALCHEMIST ARC LINEUP

BENCHMARKS

3DMark Time Spy Extreme performance graph ('GPU Index score' values)



*Intel Arc GPUs tend to skew higher in 3DMark synthetic benchmarks compared to in-game performance.

Radeon RX 7600

AMD **$450**

Affordable, unexciting

5 There's not a great deal of competition at the very budget end of the graphics card market. At the tail-end of the last generation, you had AMD, Nvidia, and Intel all battling it out with fairly reasonably priced cards, but nowadays it's only really AMD offering anything new under the $500 mark. It's a good thing AMD does offer the RX 7600 at this sort of budget-friendly price tag, otherwise we'd be in a really sticky situation. The bad news is that AMD's RX 7600 isn't an entirely exciting GPU. It's a resolutely 1080p graphics card with 8GB of GDDR6 memory, and it doesn't make waves in benchmarking. Perhaps I'm being too mean about this little card. It's compact, runs modern games just fine, and offers a modern architecture at a price where Nvidia doesn't bother to tread. For that, it's certainly got its place in the market. Though it'd have been great to see something really set the budget GPU world on fire – the RX 7600 doesn't do that, at least not at the price it's selling for today.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Reliable performance
- Relatively high power
- Quite boring

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** RDNA 3 / **TRANSISTORS:** 13.3B / **VRAM:** 8GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY SPEED:** 18 GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 128-BIT / **TBP:** 165W

Arc A770

INTEL **$550**

Still truckin'

6 Intel is still around in the budget graphics card game with the same first-generation product it released back in late 2022. There's no sign of Battlemage, the second-generation Arc GPUs, though we're expecting some movement early next year.

This Intel card represents the high-end of the Alchemist Arc lineup. As such, it's practically beefy in some regards next to the other cheaper cards in this test. The 16GB of memory is matched only by the RX 7800 XT, and the 256-bit memory bus and 225W TBP both speak to a high performing card. Unfortunately, that's not always the case, as driver issues are still a common enough occurrence on Arc despite Intel pumping out improvements. The good news is that Intel hasn't been afraid to drop the price of the A770 in light of fresh competition. Often under MSRP, this card should only be considered with a discount. Though word of warning: if you want to play older games or you can't enable resizable BAR, look elsewhere.

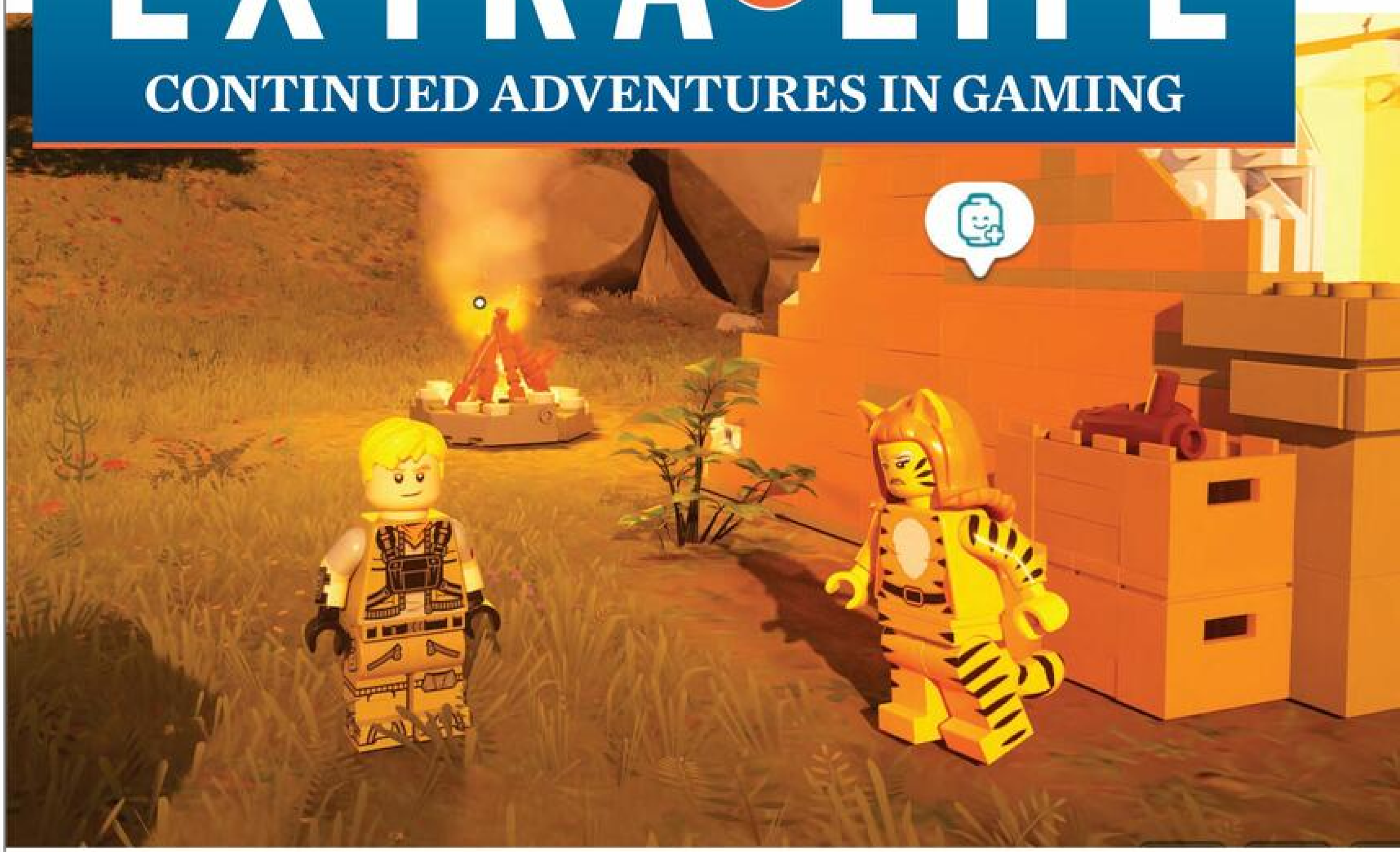
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Overkill, in ways
- Regular driver updates
- Regular driver issues

SPECS **ARCHITECTURE:** ALCHEMIST / **TRANSISTORS:** 21.7B / **VRAM:** 16GB GDDR6 / **MEMORY SPEED:** 16 GBPS / **MEMORY BUS:** 256-BIT / **TBP:** 225W

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"Two wolves ran out of some trees and killed me almost instantly"

My harrowing first nights in the surprisingly cruel world of LEGO FORTNITE

With its cheerful, kid-friendly looks and the trend of survival games being a bit more forgiving these days, I figured *Fortnite*'s new Lego survival mode would be a fun crafting sandbox where you bonk monsters on the head with swords and grab their loot.

I was wrong. *Lego Fortnite* does not pull its punches. You know how your first full in-game day of *Minecraft* can wind up being a harrowing survival experience? It's almost the same here.

I spawned alone, though into a shared world – a nice feature of *Lego Fortnite* is once someone has given you their world key, you can play in their world even if they're not online. Morgan and Tyler W had played a bit already, but were both working (like suckers) when I started. I could see on the map where they'd built a little settlement, but the game wasn't kind enough to spawn me there, where a tutorial-giving NPC had instructed them on crafting basics. Instead, it dropped me on almost entirely the opposite side of the map.

I started running toward the village, gathering sticks, stones and berries along the way. Then I died. Two wolves ran out of some trees and killed me almost instantly. I also learned that when you die, you lose all of your stuff and have to travel to your dropped backpack to get it.

Losing 100% of your stuff upon dying? What is this, *DayZ*?

After I'd gotten my stuff back, an angry boulder popped out of the ground and ran me over, and while I was fleeing from it a couple of spiders jumped on my face. Dead again, so I had to make another run to get my tiny collection of junk. This time a little gang of Lego men ran from some castle ruins and beat me to death. What the hell, Lego game?

By the time I'd built a workbench and a shelter to keep the rain off it – I have no earthly idea why, but you can't use workbenches in the rain – night had fallen, which meant that

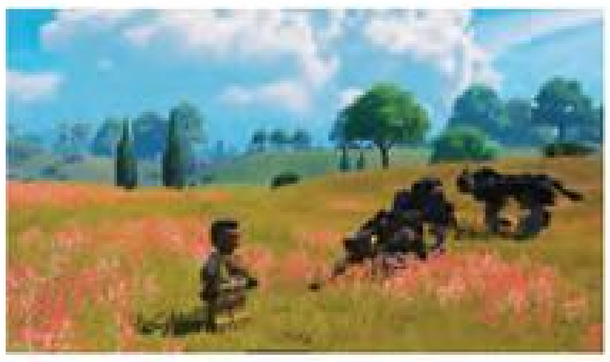
DEAD AGAIN, SO I HAD TO MAKE ANOTHER RUN TO GET MY TINY COLLECTION OF JUNK

CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON

THIS MONTH
Was saved from the Lego afterlife by a wandering catgirl.

ALSO PLAYED
Icarus, GTA Online, Balatro demo

TOP: The promised land: a few sloppily-built shacks.



skeletons began popping out of the ground literally everywhere. Dead again, and this time I respawned even further from the town.

A SAVIOUR APPEARS

I set off one more time, prepared to face death yet again, but just before night fell I finally happened upon a tiny bit of luck: I met an NPC catgirl named Tabby.

As we chatted, I was delighted to see that Tabby had a sword and not just a wooden pickaxe. She quickly thrashed an incoming skellie, so I invited her to explore with me, which meant that for the rest of the night I ran around in circles while she fought off skeletons, spiders and wolves, protecting me all the way to Morgan and Tyler's village.

I've now built a little house for me and Tabby, crafted a proper sword of my own, and I'm protected by several friendly NPC villagers who swarm over any skeletons stupid enough to try invading. But, yeah, I had a surprisingly tough beginner experience with *Lego Fortnite*! That's not a bad thing: It's always satisfying to overcome the early challenges of a survival game, I just wasn't expecting there to be quite so many of them in a *Lego* game. ■

"Its soundtrack by Thorr is incredible"

Ripping and tearing in SIGIL II

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Chainsawed a Cyberdemon. Died horribly.

ALSO PLAYED
Crysis, Max Payne 3

I deliver chainsaw death to the demon horde, all the while dodging incessant gunfire, balls of fire and flying, shrieking, flaming skulls. Oh, and did I mention I'm doing this in hell, with lava and poison-filled pits all around? This is John Romero's *SIGIL II*, the hard-as-nails unofficial sixth episode for *Doom*, and it's simply awesome.

As someone who played the OG *Doom* when it released, I played and loved Romero's first return to making full episodes for the game that made him, John Carmack, and the rest of the id Software team development legends back in the 1990s, with the original *SIGIL* released back in 2019 dramatically rekindling the original *Doom* fires. And there was no better fire stoker than Romero, who always brought an extra level of Doom Guy inferno to the legendary FPS.

SIGIL II builds on *SIGIL* by taking everything up to an even more metal, insane level. If you thought you needed to rip and tear to the maximum in *SIGIL* then think again, as this episode really is the most devious, hellishly hard and brutally satisfying episode of *Doom* ever made. And its soundtrack by Thorr is just incredible.

ICON OF SIN

SIGIL II's levels are something to behold, a hybrid of the human and hell worlds, and vary dramatically in size and complexity. Romero clearly loves to surprise gamers and keep them on their toes, as there is a subversion here, a twisted, warped-ness to how levels flow and how enemies appear and attack that is fresh and adrenaline inducing.

It's clear that, despite Romero very carefully building *SIGIL II* as an extension to the original *Doom*, the master level designer has elevated his craft to a new plane, all the while maintaining that made-in-the-1990s feel. A good example of this is how Romero introduces extra levels of verticality within these levels, or shootable Baphomet eyes that allow progress or unlock secrets.

But it's the synergy of the whole experience that reminds just how groundbreaking the original *Doom* was. In *SIGIL II*, with heavy metal blazing in your ears, a shotgun in your hands, the armies of hell encircling you, FPS nirvana is attained. ■

"Rogues can be tanks. Mages can be healers. Nothing's off the table"

SEASON OF DISCOVERY's been just weird enough to hook me

I played *World of Warcraft* vanilla back in the day – before any expansions came out – and I was bad at it. I was a human rogue with 'leet' in his name, and I somehow levelled into my mid-40s without even touching poisons. In my defence, I was 12 years old at the time.

Ultimately, I was too much of a noob to really get it. Before *WoW Classic* happened I dipped my toes into private servers, and I didn't really get it as an adult either. *WoW Classic* – as Folding Ideas' Dan Olson puts it – isn't actually that hard, at least, not in the classical sense. It's a game where patience and foreknowledge trump mechanical skill.

The appeal for try-hard guilds lies in going back to the game armed with a ton of knowledge and cleaning house. It's like using a time machine to travel to the past, then defeating a renowned swordsman because you know how to make a gun.

As an adult, I enjoy games that challenge my muscle memory – learning bosses in *Sekiro* or perfecting a challenging rotation in *FFXIV*. Vanilla *WoW* doesn't push those same buttons, so it was a fun nostalgia trip, nothing more. One thing I did miss, though, was this sense of going on an adventure.

HARVEY RANDALL

THIS MONTH
Broke a lobster man out of ice jail with three strangers.

ALSO PLAYED
Lords of the Fallen, Remnant 2

ADVENTURE, QUEST

WoW and its modern contemporaries aren't designed around patience anymore, which means an emergent adventure isn't really in the cards. This sense of exploration was dented by *WoW Classic*, too – it's a "solved game". In vanilla *WoW*, it took 156 days for a guild to take down Ragnaros. In *WoW Classic*, it took six.

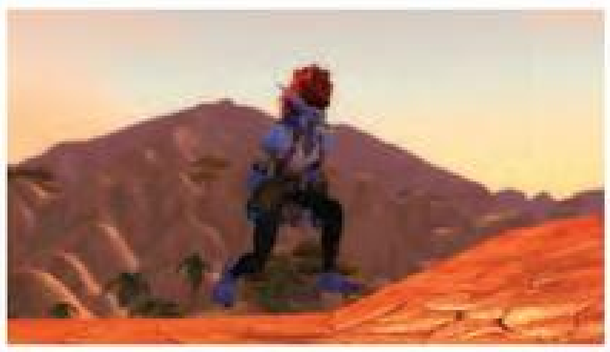
MY SHAMAN HAD TO TEAM UP WITH THREE OTHER BUDS TO FLAME-SHOCK A MAKURA

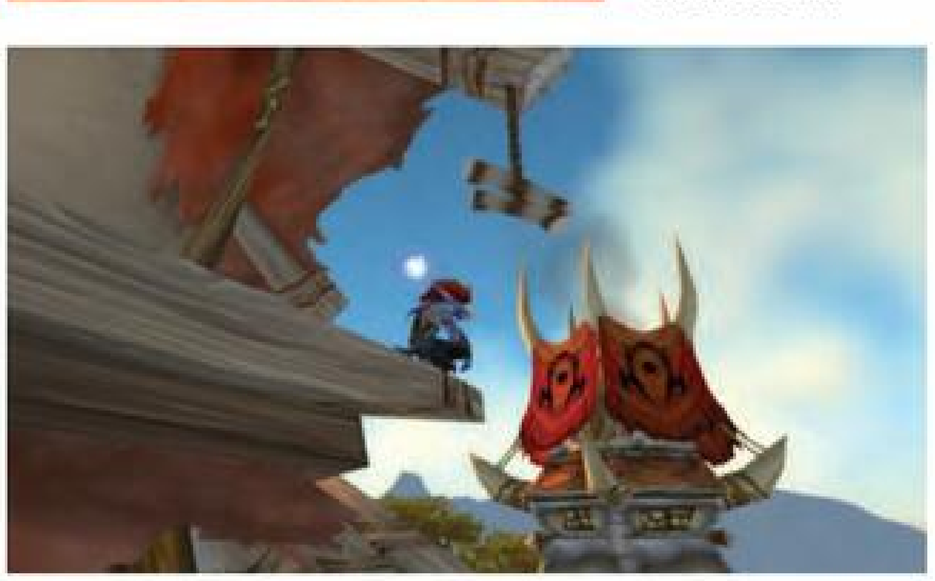
Enter Season of Discovery, *WoW Classic*'s weirdest experiment. It manages to shake off the shackles of knowledge by saying, "No changes? We're going to make all the changes." The max level cap for this season is 25, and all classes have new 'runes' which shake up the meta. Rogues and Shamans can be tanks. Mages can be healers. Nothing's off the table.

What's more, these runes have to be gathered by going on quests – not those 'kill five boars' quests you're used to, but actual, genuine quests, most of which don't appear in your quest log. They're weird and demanding in a way modern MMOs can't be any more.

For example, to unlock an AoE fire spell that let me tank, my Shaman had to team up with three other buds to flame-shock a Makura out of a block of ice. Some were your more typical questlines, sure, but you mostly just get to go on adventures.

Now, everyone has something in common with my 12-year-old self: nobody has any idea what they're doing. There are mods to help, but the player base is figuring this stuff out together. And you know what? It actually rules. ■





FAR LEFT: While getting this screenshot, I helped four other Shamans get their rune. Pay it forward.

BELOW: Waitin' at the crossroads.

"Pushes me to beat every level without taking a scratch"

Is there anything cooler than a Ghostrunner? Yes, it's GHOSTRUNNER 2

The *Ghostrunner* series of games are as cool as they come. The futuristic cyberpunk megastructures. The slick first-person combat. The dynamite synthwave beats that fuel every jump, slide and/or wall run. The cyber-assassin protagonist who wields a katana. Even the name itself, *Ghostrunner*, is ridiculously cool. It immediately offers intrigue.

Developed by Polish studio One More Level, the original debuted in 2020 and did reasonably well in terms of sales at 2.5 million units sold globally. While it was great to see a Best Action Game nomination for *Ghostrunner 2* at The Game Awards 2023, in a way I still think it's quite overlooked by general audiences. It's essentially Blade Runner meets *Mirror's Edge* for anyone looking in from afar, something that you would think would be able to grab the general consumer in an age where *Cyberpunk 2077* is mainstream.

Having spent over half a dozen hours in the sequel, I'm impressed by its extensive combat improvements, new additions – like a flashy Kawasaki-inspired motorbike – and refined gameplay. For one, the controls have seen an overhaul – a risky move when precision is key to its overall flow. It took me a bit of time to get used to the new layout, first baulking at the change within the opening minutes. It was only when my arsenal expanded it became clear this was a smart move.

MATT POSKITT

THIS MONTH
Parkouring my way through a futuristic dystopian cit.

ALSO PLAYED
Fortnite, Starfield

AHRIMAN LEAPS BACK ONLY TO THROW RED WAVES TO TEAR ME APART INCH BY INCH

PERFECTION

With its one-hit, one-kill, do-or-die structure, every move needs to be pulled off to perfection to proceed. Sure, checkpoints exist. And trust me, I'm glad they do considering the death count racked up. But where's the fun in that? *Ghostunner* pushes me to beat every level without taking a scratch. The feeling of defeating Ahriman the Destroyer, the first boss fight encountered, in one sweet, smooth run is up there with the same satisfaction as a *Souls*-like boss.

Starting on a free-standing platform, Ahriman leaps back only to throw red blistering waves ready to tear me apart inch by inch, before then trying to circle behind for a fatal blow. I'm having none of this, slashing away his health meter until a good quarter is removed. I'm then kicked back into the darkness – is this the end? No! I'm saved just in the nick of time by a mysterious soldier who provides a grapple opportunity, catapulting me back to the battle.

A few minutes on, I've been able to whittle away Ahriman's health and finish the fight for good. Victory! ■

TRYING TO GET RICH QUICK IN STARFIELD

From one side of the galaxy to the next with the one and only Jett Johnson. ***By Mat Poskitt***

Meet Jett Johnson. A wise-cracking 24th-century jerk-of-all-trades who at one time made the Kessel Run in 11 parsecs, or so he tells people. Jett's been doing these odd jobs for a while now; once a pro, now he's gotten sloppy. The end goal is to earn enough credits to retire somewhere desolate and peaceful at the edge of the galaxy, where he can live away his days drinking cocktails with teeny tiny umbrellas that wouldn't look out of place in the hands of Del Boy. Another few years should do it.

Anyone who has jumped into Bethesda's new space epic will be well aware that *Starfield* begins in a mining outpost, the last place my plucky protagonist wants to be. I've decided that Jett isn't a fan of caves... or mining... or his supervisor Lin. Even if she clearly fancies the socks of him. "I wish she'd stop staring," Jett thinks, as they head down an elevator. In reality, Jett's more interested in his co-worker, Heller, but a mysterious Artifact located on the second moon of Aneslon, Vectera is why he's primarily here. It could be worth a pretty penny.

Having successfully infiltrated a mining operation that is being funded by some jumped-up do-gooders called Constellation, Jett somehow convinces Lin to leave retrieval of the Artifact to him and him alone. A foolish move. He grabs it, only to receive a vision of time, space and a bleak future where alcohol is banned from the Settled Sytems. Instead of inspiring Jett, it terrifies him.

SPACE SCOUNDREL

Awoken by the beaming face of Heller and the uncomfortable glare of Lin, it's time to put the finishing touches to our space scoundrel. Like every character creator, I spend far too long poring over the minute details. Naturally, the ears of Jett Johnson have always been one of his defining features, I'm just not certain in a universe where you wear a space helmet for large parts whether it will make or break any relationships. Who knows. Lin seemed to like them, after all.

Going for more of a 24th-century Han Solo, I've inadvertently made Kurt Russell as Jack Burton from Big Trouble in Little China. Just with a bit more timber. He was once in prime condition, now has a bit of a belly, yet can still react like a cat when needed. Multiple lines fall under his eyes, conveying that he's been from one side of the galaxy to the other.

The name Jett is often associated with aviation along with meaning adventurous and bold, a fitting title for our man in the sky. As a superhero fan I enjoy alliteration, so Johnson comes naturally. A quick Google search yields results that Jett Johnson is an Australian Supercar racer, something I could imagine my Jett doing in another life, so it sticks. Throw in a dash of Captain Jack Harkness' bravado from Doctor Who and a likeable uselessness

AS A SUPERHERO FAN, I ENJOY ALLITERATION SO JOHNSON COMES NATURALLY

similar to that of Peter Quill from Guardians of the Galaxy, and we have our leading man. Will Jett end up a hero? Or will he continue sinning in this godforsaken cosmos? I'm not even sure at this point.

BYE BYE, BARRETT

Leaving the mining outpost, Constellation member Barrett arrives to pick up the Artifact with a band of pirates shortly following. Not interested in getting involved with local politics, Jett tries to sneak off to commandeer the former's ship. Locked. Reluctantly returning to the firefight, he quickly dispenses the rogues in the hope of being compensated in some way. Instead, Barrett lectures him about being part of 'something bigger' and a lot of yada yada about joining Constellation. He even loans his spaceship and robot in goodwill as he stays behind to clear up the mess he made. See ya sucker!

Unable to veer off into the outer reaches of space yet, this bloody robot (who Jett is half-tempted to kick out of the airlock) is making me stick to my promise by first heading to the planet Kreet to fend off some more pirates. It's here, face-to-face with one of the pirate captains of the Crimson Fleet, where I expect to enforce my first rule of always engaging in combat whenever offered in dialogue. That doesn't happen. An unfortunate bug means the conversation fails to start, leaving this bewildered pirate shouting vague threatening remarks from afar until I decide to do the only decent thing remaining – and put him out of his time-loop misery.

We make it to Constellation headquarters on New Atlantis. Walter Stroud, some benefactor bloke, is surprised I brought the ship back. "If we hadn't insisted on installing those emergency protocols, I guarantee you this rock breaker here would be halfway to Neon," he tells the other members of Constellation.

They talk some mumbo jumbo about finding answers to the universe while Jett pockets a shiny compass off one of their desks. Eventually, an

THE RULES

1. Take no prisoners: always opt for the 'Attack' option when offered.
2. Sarcasm at its finest: choose the most sarcastic or rudest dialogue at all times.
3. Avoid Constellation missions and instead help out anyone who needs it... for a price.

Heller (left) and Lin (right) mesmerised by Jett Johnson's good looks.

invitation to join their crusade is offered. Jett's not interested, especially after experiencing that psychedelic trip caused by the Artifact. "Good luck!" I imagine him half-heatedly saying, slamming the door on the way out. "Now, where to get a drink."

SAVED BY THE BELL

A good dozen or so hours later, I've made my way across several star systems, earned some credits through a few bounty missions and traded up Barrett's spaceship (I wonder if he's still waiting for me on Vectera to return it) for a new deluxe model found in a secret outpost on the Denebola I-b moon. Dubbed the Razorleaf, it's faster, stronger and has plenty of fuel to get that little bit closer to the edge of the galaxy. It's just the name that doesn't suit, sounding more like a *Pokémon* attack than a place for Jett to call home. After much careful consideration, I dub this flying machine The Kapowski after my '90s crush, Kelly Kapowski from Saved by the Bell. Oh, how his enemies will run in fear.

Heading to the tropical resort outpost of Paradiso on Porrima II for a much-needed break, I notice a large unidentifiable ship drifting in space above the planet. Hailing the vehicle, it appears that its communications are down. Usually, Jett wouldn't have a problem zooming off to the nearby sandy beaches, however, a strange feeling compels him to dock. Most likely the thought of extra credits to tip the bar staff when he keeps them up four hours after they should have closed. "Here we go again," he announces to the emptiness of the Kapowski.

A trio of humans – dressed somewhat like the virtual ABBA reunion – led by Captain Diana Brackenridge welcome Jett aboard the ECS Constant. The irony of the situation amuses him. Having now completed its near-200-year journey from Earth, the coloniser's new planet is already inhabited. And with communications failing, Jett is asked to play diplomat between the two parties. It's a big ask, one that may result in the closure of Paradiso. That's a sacrifice he's not willing to make. From seemingly nowhere, he explains that "diplomacy may require compromise", briefly peeling back the curtain on the man he used to be via that nugget of advice.

HERO, ANTI-HERO OR SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY?
Jett Johnson has seen better days
1
HAIR
Long luscious hair that blows in the wind. Needs washing four times a day to obtain this look.
2
DAD BOD
The ultimate 'dad bod' – somewhere in-between Tony Soprano and Jax Teller.
3
CLOTHES
A fashion sense that briefly came back into style, and then quickly left again.

Landing a few hundred yards in front of Paradiso, the beauty of its surroundings slaps Jett in the face like his second wife after catching him in bed with their maid of honour, the priest and half the band on their wedding night. If it's not the auburn palm trees drenched by a blazing sun, it's the American-style diners scattered across the rocky terrains that lead to a blue lake that's begging for a swim. What takes away from this tranquil setting is the corporate marines and general abundance of people blanketing every corner. If there was ever any peace and quiet here, it's now long gone.

Coming back to his senses, Jett heads for negotiations. Oliver Campbell is the man in charge, a self-serving bureaucrat who has no intention of giving away handouts to a group of cosmic freeloaders who just showed up on his doorstep. I can tell talking with this guy is futile, awaiting the opportunity from a dialogue prompt to attack. It's a prompt that never arrives.

Three options are presented. The first is to convince the ECS crew to settle on the planet under the jurisdiction of the Paradiso Group until they pay off their debts, basically selling them into slavery. The second is to purchase a Grav Drive from Jett's own credits (unthinkable) that the Paradiso group will then help to install free of charge, so the ECS can find a new suitable planet. And the third is to make the ship 'go away' no questions asked. None of these are particularly enticing while the greedy smirk from the CEO burns into Jett's eyes, offering a fourth option: kill Oliver Campbell.

I'd love to say that this is when Campbell is blasted into a million pieces, the Paradiso Group falls into disrepute, the ECS takes over creating a better mankind and in their gratitude, Jett gets a piece of land on a tropical remote island, the end. *Starfield* has other ideas. You see,

BELOW: Asteroids or bumper cars?

ABOVE: Jett's seen a lot of strange stuff... and he knows when to make an exit.

IF THERE WAS EVER ANY PEACE AND QUIET HERE, IT'S NOW LONG GONE

even though Campbell has taken more bullets than Rambo in a Quentin Tarantino flick, it seems his destiny is to live due to being a non-killable NPC. With this disappointing revelation, alongside keeping to my set of three rules, regretfully it's time for the ECS to disappear. A quick reset to the moment before Jett tried to make Swiss cheese of Oliver, and with a deep sigh, we launch into the atmosphere.

TOUGH CHOICES

As the ship gets closer I ponder whether Jett would do this. Sure, he's made some mistakes, insulted more people than Ricky Gervais at the Golden Globes and killed countless people for money but never an entire survival crew. How many Mai Tais would he need to drink to forget this nightmare? It's all becoming a bit much.

Serendipitously, a thought crosses my mind seconds before firing at the stationed ship. The phrasing of the second option: "Hypothetically, what could make a ship like that go away?" Where's the word 'Attack'? There isn't any. It's typically always there when combat is expected. It isn't though. Not this time. It's a technicality! A small, convenient technicality, mind – but that's good enough for me and that's good enough for Jett.

Landing back at Paradiso, miraculously the option to purchase a Grav Drive is still available. It's a sign! Or maybe just a costly venture that will put Jett's dreams back a couple more years. Whatever the reasoning, it's a way out. I'm sent to HopeTech on the planet Polvo to meet engineer Bennu St James, who offers me the Grav Drive for an extortionate 40,000 credits! Jett's powers of persuasion manage to knock the price down to 25,000. "That seems very reasonable. Thank you!" says Jett, behind gritted teeth. Well, if it avoids a bloodbath, it's something. Paradise can wait. ■

Take me down to the Paradiso City...

MYSTIC BOB

"Crystal ball hear what I say, what shall be the ideal gaming PC specs for the sixth GTA?"

GPU: Nvidia RTX 50-series / AMD RX 8000-series
CPU: AMD Zen 5 / Intel Core Ultra
RAM: 32GB DDR5
SSD: PCIe 5.0 SSD 1TB
MB: PCIe 6.0
PSU: 1,000W

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